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CENTER STAGE

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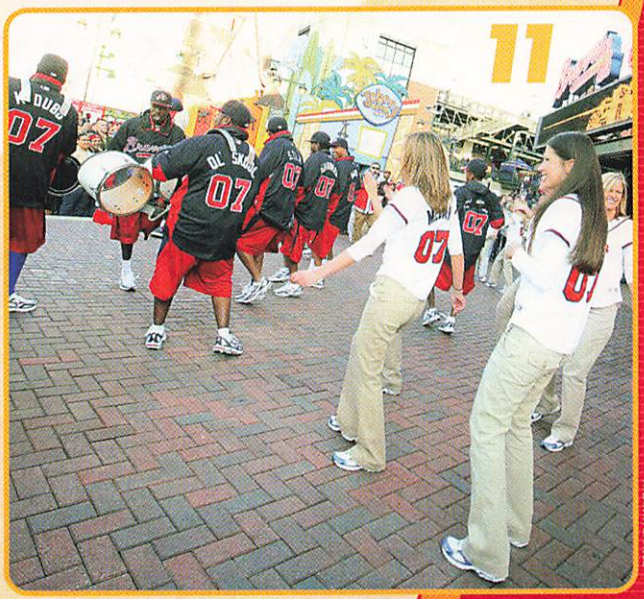

ATLANTA BRAVES

ATLANTA BRAVES

CARLOS RESTREPO

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by Andy Hayt

Chipper Jones courtesy of the Atlanta Braves

Design by Clark Odom

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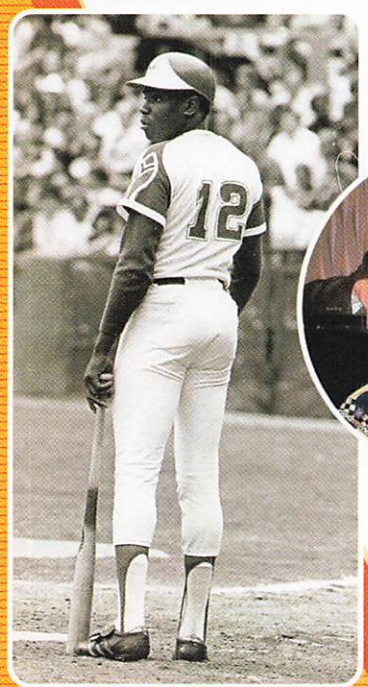

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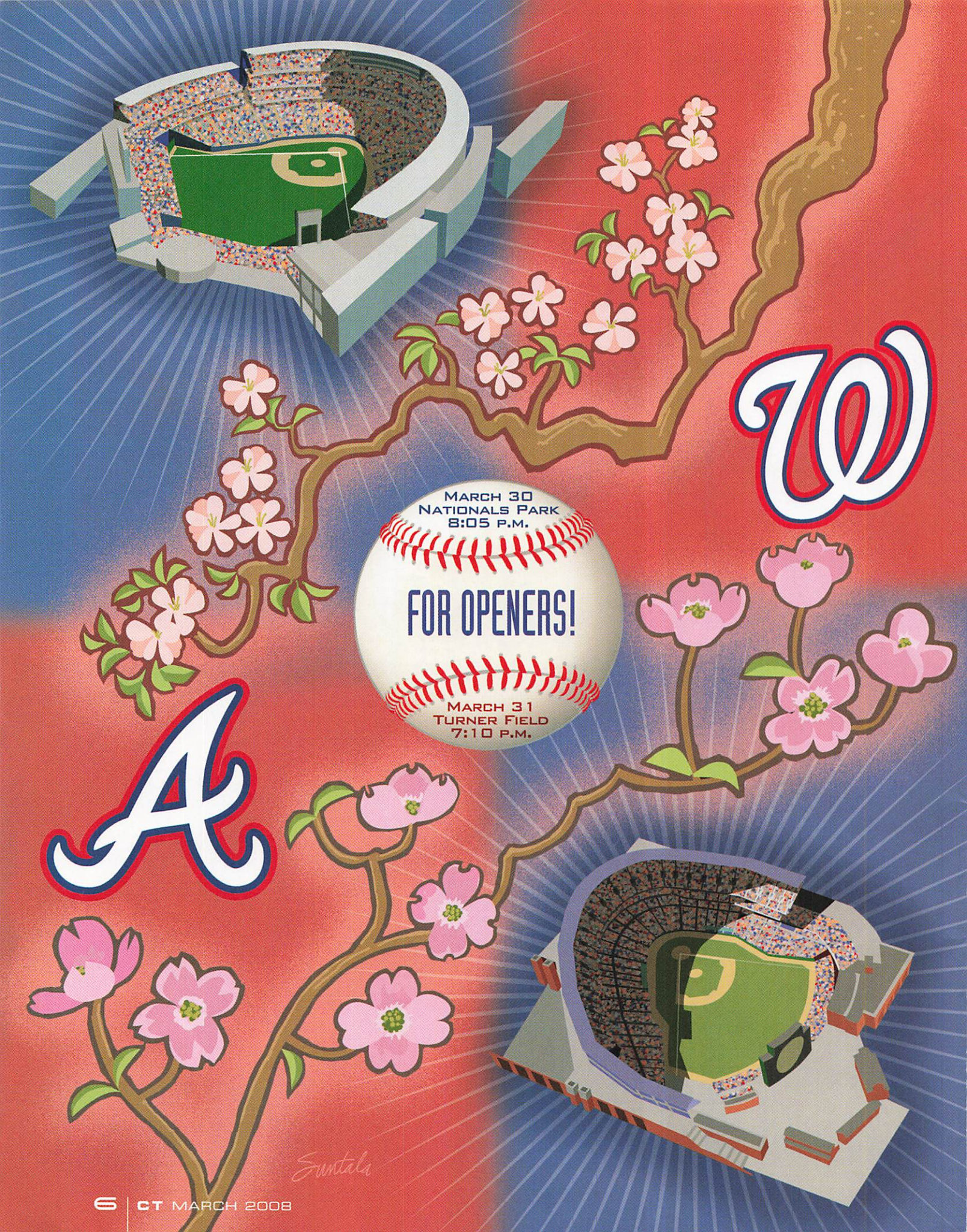

March 30
Nationals Park
8:05 p.m.
FOR OPENERS!
March 31
Turner Field
7:10 p.m.
Suntala

CAPITAL CHRISTENING

The Season Begins With a Sunday Night Gala In a New Palace Amid Presidential Pomp and Cherry Blossoms

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

THOUGH THE SEASON officially begins on March 25 when the Red Sox play the Oakland A's in Tokyo, Braves fans will focus their attention a little closer to home for what they no doubt consider the real opener.

That takes place on Sunday, March 30, when the Braves will be in Washington, D.C., to help the Nationals christen brand-new Nationals Park. Opening Night in North America promises to be a grand event that will be televised nationally by ESPN (8:05 p.m.).

Situated near the Washington Navy Yard on the banks of the Anacostia River, Nationals Park is the latest monumental structure in a city famous for its monuments, something not lost on club president Stan Kasten, whose office will be located at the new stadium.

"On my commute to work, I'll pass the Lincoln, Washington, and Jefferson Monuments, and the Capitol," said Kasten. "It's a pretty good commute."

Kasten is no stranger to overseeing the building and opening of sports venues. He was president of the Atlanta Braves from 1976 until 2001, including the years when Atlanta's Olympic Stadium was built and then retrofitted into Turner Field for its 1997 opening. He also was president of the NBA Atlanta Hawks and NHL Atlanta Thrashers when they prepared to play at new Philips Arena in downtown Atlanta (1999).

Such experience allowed Kasten to seem unfazed with Opening Night mere weeks away and much work yet to be completed. Construction began 23 months ago, and crews have been working seven days a week, around the clock, since the start of the year.

"As busy as it is around here, it's a labor of love," said Kasten.

Opening Night plans are still being finalized, but it's a safe bet that the festivities will reach "gala" status.

"The president (George W. Bush) has been invited to throw out the first pitch," said Kasten. "We know he'll try to make it. There will be special entertainment and all on a national stage with ESPN broadcasting the game as their open for this season's

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

This rendering of a completed Nationals Park - with cherry blossoms in bloom in left field and Washington monuments against the skyline - is what Braves fans will see when they watch the March 30 season opener.

Sunday Night Baseball. It's going to be spectacular."

Kasten tossed around that word "spectacular" often when describing different elements of the ballpark. The 4,500-square-foot, high-definition scoreboard certainly qualifies, as do the views from the stands, especially the striking white dome of the Capitol in the distance past left field. The District has specific height-restriction laws preserving the scale of the city. Developers may build to the width of the adjacent street plus 20 feet, so a building facing a 90-foot-wide street could be only 110 feet tall. Nationals Park was required to adhere to those same standards, hence the top of the scoreboard stands at the very highest point allowed, approximately 349 feet above the street.

Signage is also highly restricted in D.C. The only sign on Nationals Park is found on the river side of the stadium where "Nationals" is spelled out in tall red letters.

The ballpark's exterior façade is an amalgam of steel, glass, and pre-cast concrete, to replicate limestone, creating a look characteristic of much of the architecture in D.C. The park is light and airy, a far cry from the dark, circular bowl that was RFK Stadium, the Nationals' former home built in 1961 and shared with both the NFL Washington Redskins and DC United, a professional soccer team.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

Nationals president Stan Kasten, who was president of the Braves when Turner Field was built, tells the press about Nationals Park.

Though the Navy Yard and many of the area's older buildings are red brick, Nationals Ballpark combines the look of both a sleek office building and a stylish sports venue. "I've always said that it doesn't matter what the façade looks like," said Kasten. "If you ask a Red Sox fan to describe Fenway Park, what will they mention? The Green Monster. The most important vista is between the foul poles."

At Nationals Park, fans facing the two foul poles will see not only the high-definition scoreboard in right-center field, but also the Nationals' equivalent to Turner Field's Chop House - a two-story Centerfield Club and Lounge featuring a unique porch of seats, called the Batter's Eye Box.

And over the left-field bleacher seats, a grove of cherry blossom trees, a Washington, D.C., icon, are set to bloom in early spring (the Cherry Blossom Festival, by the way, officially begins the day before the opener).

The cherry blossom trees were just one of many finishing upgrades made to the original ballpark plan. Among the other changes were extra square footage in bathrooms and a second floor to the Centerfield Club and Lounge.

Kasten touted the ballpark's sightlines and the proximity of fans to the field. The baseline seating is up to 17 feet closer to the infield than at RFK Stadium. And the outline of the field itself is a far cry from the bland outfield arc at RFK Stadium. Nationals Park has a number of quirky turns and angles, including one in right-center field that hearkens to an angle in old Griffith Stadium (1911-65) put in place to accommodate a tree growing in a neighboring yard!

Over 90 percent of the 41,222 seats, including Club Seats, in Nationals Park are considered "traditional seating," meaning

PATTY RASMUSSEN

Because of D.C. restrictions, this is the only sign on the outside of the new ballpark.

they don't require a multi-year purchase commitment. However, for those who wish to experience VIP treatment while attending a game, Nationals Park delivers.

There are three different levels of suites - eight Washington Suites on the park's Main level, 22 Lincoln Suites on the Club Level concourse, and 36 Jefferson Suites on the Suite Level concourse. Depending on which suite fans are in, they can enjoy either the Nationals Club or the two-story Stars and Stripes Club.

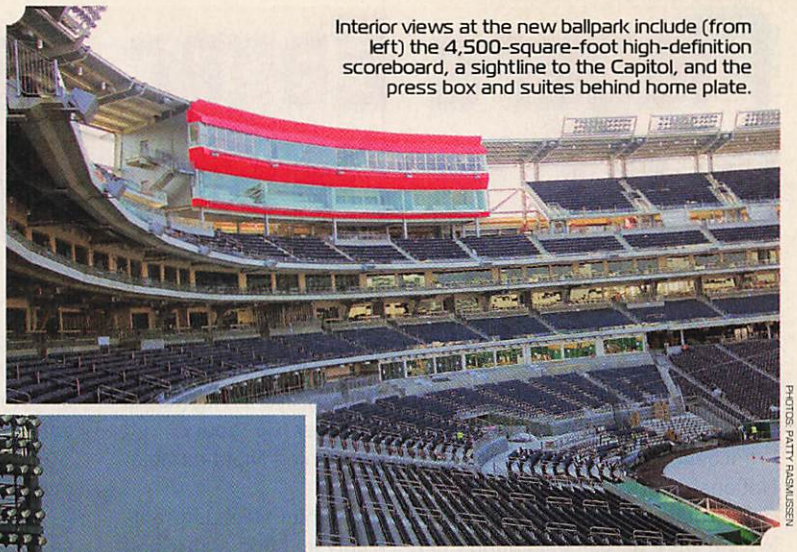
Thirteen hundred (1,300) Diamond Seats, situated just below the Main Concourse, and 500 Presidential Seats, are located immediately behind home plate.

The Presidential Seats live up to their name with comfortable

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

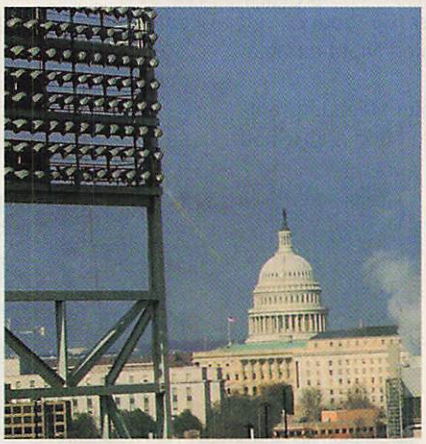
There are eight Washington Suites like this on the main level and 58 Lincoln and Jefferson Suites on two other levels.

padding and 22 inches of width. Presidential seat-holders have access to the exclusive Presidential Club which features a mahogany "Oval Office bar," an all-inclusive gourmet buffet, and two window walls, one overlooking the interior batting cages used by Nationals players, the other overlooking the press conference room where fans can listen to manager Manny Acta's pre- and post-game press conferences.



Interior views at the new ballpark include (from left) the 4,500-square-foot high-definition scoreboard, a sightline to the Capitol, and the press box and suites behind home plate.

PHOTOS: PATTY RASMUSSEN



Speaking of Presidential Seats, it's unlikely that the actual U.S. president would sit there. For security purposes, VIPs will take advantage of the Owner's Box.

While the average fan won't experience the lavish features of the Presidential Club, they will get to enjoy other amenities and off-the-field entertainment. The Strike Zone is a 15,000-square-foot venue built especially for fans with small children, much like Turner Field's Tooner Field. Included in the area will be interactive games, a jungle gym for kids 4-years-old and under, and retail shops - including a Build-a-Bear Store.

The majority of fans at Nationals Park will enter through a plaza area on the ballpark's center-field side. Plans call for many of the same features found at Turner Field's plaza - concessions, retail stores and games - to be on the Nationals Park plaza.

It also will be home to three statues paying tribute to baseball greats who played in D.C. - catcher Josh Gibson of the Negro League Homestead Grays, Walter "Big Train" Johnson, one of the game's greatest pitchers from the original Washington Senators, and Frank "Hondo" Howard, a powerful outfielder with the Washington Senators in the 1960s. Kasten estimated the statues, and other specially commissioned ballpark art, will debut beginning in the second half of the 2008 season.

Behind the scenes, the amenities are equally plentiful. The visiting clubhouse space, complete with its own large workout room, is gigantic compared to the current visitor's clubhouse at RFK Stadium. Kasten said players and coaches weren't consulted about features they wanted in the ballpark.

"But we knew the shortcomings (at RFK)," he said. "We knew we needed to bring it up to the customary standards of a major league ballpark. But our players were used to very sub-standard facilities."

He can't say that anymore. The Nationals' clubhouse is, to use a Kasten-ism, "spectacular." It's a large, oval-shaped room with mahogany finishes and little touches such as electrical outlets for cell phone or iPod chargers in each player's personal, key-locked safe.

The Nationals' front office staff, currently housed in cramped space at RFK Stadium, will move into their new digs in mid-March, starting with the essential game-day staff. The offices are on the side of the stadium facing the river. A cement factory adjacent to the ballpark on the river side will eventually make way for the 5.8-acre "RiverFront on the Anacostia," a mixed-use, retail, office and residential development.

Approximately 60 percent of Nationals fans live in the northern Virginia suburbs. Those fans are being encouraged, as they were at RFK Stadium, to use the excellent DC Metro mass transit system to get to the park.

Two parking decks, each with 600 spaces, flank the walkway to the Navy Yard Metro Station's Half Street entrance. Season ticket holders have been guaranteed parking, though at press time, the complete parking plan had yet to be unveiled.

The Navy Yard Metro station is being upgraded with more gates, fare vending machines, elevators and escalators to accommodate 15,000 patrons per hour. Not all upgrades will be in place for the opener, but the station will be useable.

A March 29 exhibition game between the Baltimore Orioles and Nationals is being billed as a "dress rehearsal." In fact, the game isn't even open to the public - only season-ticket holders and invited guests will be able to attend. Then there's Opening Night.

"We wanted to open on a Sunday, to keep traffic to a minimum," said Kasten. "Then the team goes on the road for a week (the Braves immediately return to Atlanta for the March 31 home opener), which will give us some more time to work on things."

No doubt, the behind-the-scenes workers will put that time to good use.

Because the ballpark is owned by the D.C. Sports and Entertainment Commission, it can be used for other non-baseball events, eight per year. One such event will take place on April 17 when Pope Benedict XVI says mass at Nationals Park.

Asked which of the many Nationals Park features he most looks forward to experiencing, Kasten offered a surprising answer.

"We wanted something to evoke D.C., something uniquely D.C.," he said. "We had a lot of ideas floating around, and some were pretty kitschy (tacky), to tell you the truth. But the cherry blossoms are elegant, not overdone. I think I'll be pretty proud to see those cherry blossoms."

Players Eager To Participate In D.C.'s Opening Night History

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

THE MAGNITUDE of opening the baseball season on a national stage in a brand new ballpark isn't lost on Braves players.

Even though the Braves will have to fly from Atlanta to Washington, D.C., and back in a little over 36 hours, Jeff Francoeur called playing in the March 30 Opening Night game at Nationals Park an "honor."

"I'm glad we're going up there," he said. "I might feel differently if we were across the country, but it's only an hour-and-a-half flight. The biggest hassle will probably be the drive from the airport to the stadium! We're opening the season in this country on national TV, a game that a lot of people will be watching. It's a big deal! And what makes it even cooler is that it's in our nation's capital in what I've heard is a beautiful stadium."

Francoeur is not alone in his enthusiasm for the big event.

"It's cool that they chose us to open up the new stadium," said Tim Hudson. "It's just one game, but I'll always be able to say that I played in the first game at Nationals Park."

Brian McCann is hoping that President George W. Bush, whom he met last September at the White House, is able to throw out the first pitch.

"It's an experience that a lot of guys won't ever have, opening up a new stadium, maybe the President there," he said. "It's an honor."

William H. Taft was the first president to throw out the first pitch of the season. He did so in Washington on April 14,1910, with future Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson on the receiving end.

In addition to the excitement of Opening Night, the players are also eager to learn how the park plays.

"I've heard it's a hitter's park," said reliever Tyler Yates. "What a surprise! That's the type of ballparks that are built these days. But just because it's their home opener doesn't mean we aren't going to try to shut them down. They may get their hits but we get to hit there too."

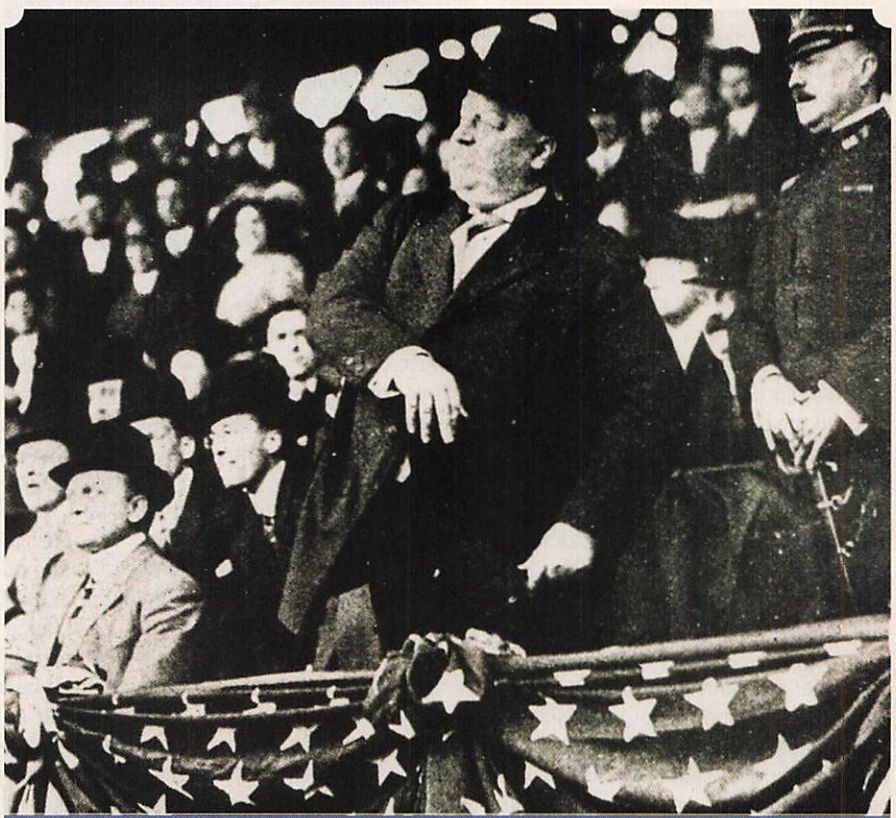
The distances to the outfield fence are: 336 feet down the left-field line, 335 to the right-field foul pole, 377 in left-center, 370 in right-center, and 403 to straight-away center field.

GM Frank Wren said that he was contacted by Major League Baseball as far back as November about playing in the Opening Night game in Washington.

"They called and asked if we were willing to make the trip up there for one game," said Wren. "I talked it over with (president) John Schuerholz and Bobby Cox to see if they felt it would put us at any competitive disadvantage. They didn't think it made much difference that early in the season."

Like many of the players, Wren views the game as a chance to participate in baseball history.

"It's an honor to be asked to help open a new ballpark," he said.



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

William H. Taft was the first president to deliver a ceremonial first pitch, throwing this strike in 1910 in Washington to future Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson.

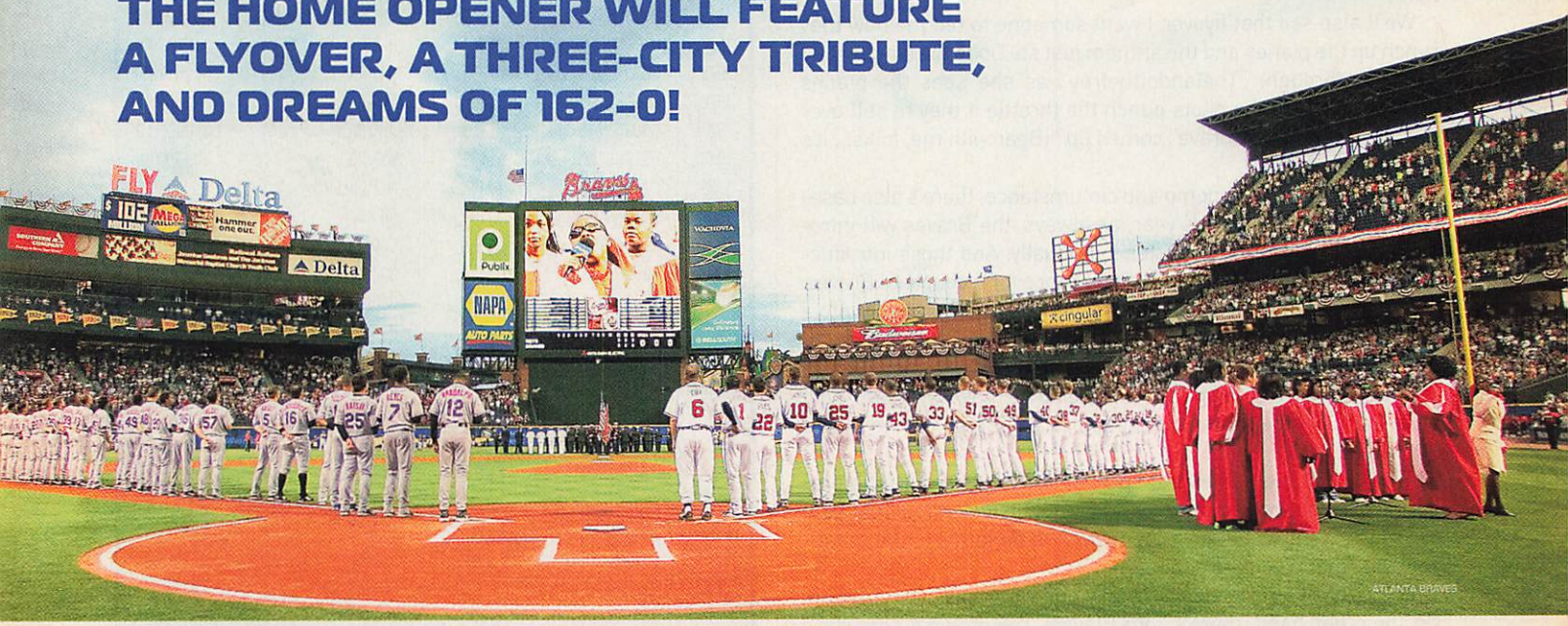
Opening Nationals Park will mark the second time that Tom Glavine has participated in starting the season in a new ballpark. Though he didn't pitch when the Braves opened Turner Field on April 4, 1997 (Denny Neagle started), he was on the Braves.

"This is a little different because there's not as much 'history' at RFK Stadium for current players," he said. "Obviously, we haven't been going there as long as some other parks. But it's exciting whenever there's a new venue. We want to know how it will play, what's it like. Players are just like fans in that regard. Opening Night will be an exciting night."

BY JAY BUSBEE

PLAY BALL!

THE HOME OPENER WILL FEATURE A FLYOVER, A THREE-CITY TRIBUTE, AND DREAMS OF 162-0!



FOR ME, OPENING DAY'S all about the flyover.

Those F-18s come screaming across the sky just as the national anthem hits "Hoooome of the Braaaaave," their wings barely clearing the top of the Sky Field Coke bottle. Their engines roar loud enough to change your heartbeat, and for a moment, you believe that this is the year the Braves go 162-0.

"The game begins in the spring, when everything is new again," Bart Giamatti once said of Opening Day, and while the late commissioner probably wouldn't have cared much for the flyover ritual - he leaned more to the romantic, pastoral ideal of baseball - he undoubtedly understood the hope and energy it inspires.

The Braves have begun their last three seasons on the road (this year makes four), which always gives me a strange anticlimactic feeling. After six weeks of spring training, you're hyped for baseball that counts, whether it's the traditional Cincinnati Monday afternoon opener of past seasons, or the more-recent, made-for-TV creation, the jump-the-gun Sunday night game.

Speaking of jumping the gun... Let's not forget the MLB opener March 25 in Tokyo between the Red Sox and Oakland. Does that even count? It's the earliest "opener" in history, it's in Asia, and it's the American League!

But if the Braves' recent on-the-road openers have made fans feel like they're waiting to jump in a race that everyone else is already running, this year's going to feel like the start of the Peachtree Road Race - walk, stop, run, stop, walk, run. It also might feel a little early, since March 31 ties 1998 and 2003 as the earliest home openers in franchise history. Heck, the Dogwood Festival doesn't even start until April 4, though there surely will be plenty of blossoms on March 31!

The Braves finish the exhibition season with two games at Turner Field against the Indians on March 28 and 29, then get the honor of opening the 2008 season - at least the North American season! - in Washington on Sunday night, March 30. Then the Braves fly back to Atlanta for a Monday game, March 31, against the Pirates, followed by an off day Tuesday - after two games, everybody needs a break (or a makeup date in case of bad weather), right? - and start the season in earnest on Wednesday.

"That's a strange schedule, all right," Jeff Francoeur said. "It's going to take everybody awhile to find their rhythm."

Francoeur, more than most, has reason to want the regular season to crank into second gear.

"I think I'm 0-for-9 in openers," he said, laughing. "Slow starter."

He's also 1-for-7 in home-openers. So, he's probably more ready for that Wednesday (April 2) game to get here than anybody else.

The focus of this year's Opening Day at Turner Field will be the Braves' history as a three-city franchise. Dating back to Boston (1871-1952) and Milwaukee (1953-65), the Braves are the longest continuously oper-

ating franchise in pro sports history, and the only team to win championships while operating in three different cities (1914 Boston, 1957 Milwaukee and 1995 Atlanta).

A tribute video tracing the Braves' lineage from 1876, when the National League was formed (they played in the National Association from 1871-75) and the team was known as the Boston Red Caps, to 2008 will kick off the festivities. (Let's hope there's an appropriate tribute to the time the team was known as the Beaneaters.)

Pre-game ceremonies will also feature an as-yet-unrevealed-but-probably-famous singer of the National Anthem. (My bet's on someone connected to American Idol. Those folks are everywhere now.)

We'll also see that flyover. I want someone to tell me how they synch up the planes and the anthem just so. Does the singer start hurrying through, "Thelandofthefree" as she sees the planes approaching? Do the pilots punch the throttle if they're still over the zoo when "of the brave" comes up? (Bear with me, folks... it's been a long winter.)

In addition to all the pomp and circumstance, there's also baseball to be played, and this year, as always, the Braves will introduce every player on the roster individually. And those introductions could carry some special significance for a couple of Braves.

Javy Lopez, a certified '90s-era legend, worked himself into a spring training invitation, and as of this writing - just before pitchers and catchers reported to Disney - had a decent shot at making the team as a backup catcher. Should he make the team, he'll enjoy possibly the loudest reception of any Brave during player introductions.

"That would be something special," Lopez said during a pre-spring training workout session. "I try not to think about that stuff too much," - he's still got a lot of work to do to make the team - "but yes, that would be a lot of fun."

Lopez, of course, could count on a uniformly positive reception. On the other hand, there's Tom Glavine, the prodigal son who's enjoyed/endured a love/hate relationship with Braves fans. Glavine was the MVP of Atlanta's only World Championship team, but he also stood out as the public face of the striking players in 1994. He took a pay cut to return to Atlanta for this season, but he jumped to the cursed Mets for a huge payday in 2003.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

Hall of Fame third baseman Eddie Mathews is the only man in history to play for the same franchise in three cities (Boston 1952, Milwaukee 1953-65, Atlanta 1966).

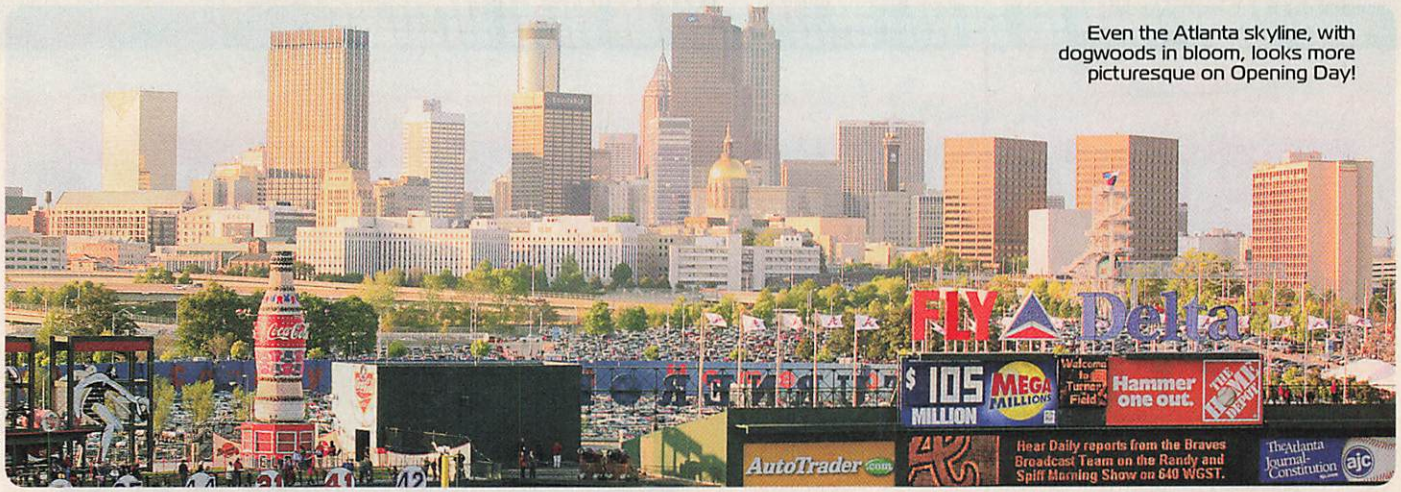
ATLANTA HOME OPENERS

YEAR	OPPONENT	RESULT	PITCHERS OF RECORD	
			BRAVES	OPPONENT
1966	PITTSBURGH	L, 2-3 (13)	CLONINGER	SCHWALL
1967	SAN FRANCISCO	L, 0-2	CLONINGER	PERRY
1968	CINCINNATI	W, 4-3	NIEKRO	TSITOURIS
1969	SAN FRANCISCO	W, 5-4	STONE	LINZY
1970	SAN FRANCISCO	W, 9-3	JARVIS	REBERGER
1971	PITTSBURGH	L, 2-8	JARVIS	MOOSE
1972	LOS ANGELES	L, 3-8	STONE	SINGER
1973	HOUSTON	L, 1-2 (13)	UPSHAW	GLADDING
1974	LOS ANGELES	W, 7-4	REED	DOWNING
1975	HOUSTON	W, 6-1	NIEKRO	RICHARD
1976	CINCINNATI	L, 1-6	TORREALBA	NORMAN
1977	HOUSTON	W, 4-3	RUTHVEN	LEMONGELLO
1978	LOS ANGELES	L, 4-13	NIEKRO	SUTTON
1979	CINCINNATI	L, 4-9	M. MAHLER	SEAVER
1980	CINCINNATI	L, 1-4	NIEKRO	PASTORE
1981	CINCINNATI	W, 5-3	GARBER	SOTO
1982	HOUSTON	W, 6-2	BOGGS	SUTTON
1983	SAN DIEGO	W, 4-2	BEDROSIAN	CHIFFER
1984	PHILADELPHIA	L, 0-5	BARKER	CARLTON
1985	SAN DIEGO	L, 3-7	CAMP	HAWKINS
1986	MONTREAL	W, 6-0	R. MAHLER	B. SMITH
1987	PHILADELPHIA	W, 6-0	R. MAHLER	RAWLEY
1988	CHICAGO	L, 9-10 (13)	ACKER	BIELECKI
1989	LOS ANGELES	W, 6-1	GLAVINE	VALENZUELA
1990	SAN FRANCISCO	L, 0-8	GLAVINE	REUSCHEL
1991	LOS ANGELES	L, 4-6	SMOLTZ	BELCHER
1992	SAN FRANCISCO	L, 4-11	LEIBRANDT	BURBA
1993	LOS ANGELES	W, 6-1	GLAVINE	CANDIOTTI
1994	SAN FRANCISCO	L, 5-7	SMOLTZ	FREY
1995	SAN FRANCISCO	W, 12-5	MADDUX	MULHOLLAND
1996	SAN FRANCISCO	W, 10-8	MADDUX	LEITER
1997	CHICAGO	W, 5-4	CLONTZ	ADAMS
1998	MILWAUKEE	W, 2-1	LIGTENBERG	WICKMAN
1999	PHILADELPHIA	L, 4-7	GLAVINE	SCHILLING
2000	COLORADO	W, 2-0	GLAVINE	ASTACIO
2001	NEW YORK	L, 4-6 (10)	LIGTENBERG	COOK
2002	PHILADELPHIA	W, 7-2	GLAVINE	PERSON
2003	MONTREAL	L, 2-10	MADDUX	ARMAS
2004	NEW YORK	L, 2-7	ORTIZ	GLAVINE
2005	NEW YORK	W, 3-1	THOMSON	ZAMBRANO
2006	PHILADELPHIA	W, 5-3	VILLARREAL	FRANKLIN
2007	NEW YORK	L, 1-11	REDMAN	PEREZ

So, how's he going to be received? Cheers or boos? Will Atlanta's fans let bygones be bygones, or will they hold onto old grudges? (Fans gave Julio Franco a standing O after he returned from a brief stint with the Mets.)

Glavine concedes it's been on his mind "a little bit, not a lot. As I get through spring training and get closer to coming back here, I'll think about it more. Hopefully, it's going to be great. Hopefully, I'll have a good spring training, and I'll give fans a reason to be excited to have me on this team."

Some of those fans are going to be close enough to welcome Glavine back with a handshake. The opener marks the debut of the SunTrust Club, an ultra-premium section directly behind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ALLISON SHIRREFFS

Even the Atlanta skyline, with dogwoods in bloom, looks more picturesque on Opening Day!

home plate. Its closest seats will be 43 feet from home plate, closer even than the pitcher, so fans can offer Brian McCann heckling suggestions for upcoming batters.

In addition to unprecedented closeness to the action, the SunTrust section will feature all-you-can-eat food, private parking, and access to a private lounge/wine bar under the stands. (The players' old putting green was demolished to make room for the lounge, but sacrifices must be made in the name of progress.) Seats run up to $25K per seat per season, multiyear contracts only. Time to bust into the kids' college fund!

Even the players can get caught up in the pre-game energy, although they're the only ones who need to keep level heads.

"You've got to breathe," Francoeur said. "You've got to relax. If you get too hyped up, too jacked up, you lose control quick. You've got to treat it as just another regular season game."

For a team that had a long history of playing woefully in the regular season before 1991, the Braves have done all right in home openers, going 21-21 since moving to Atlanta in 1966.

The Braves' first home opener in Atlanta was a classic, even though it ended in a 13-inning, 3-2 loss to the Pirates in 1966. Starter Tony Cloninger went the distance for Atlanta, striking out 12 but giving up a decisive, two-run homer to future Hall of Famer Willie Stargell in the top of the 13th. Joe Torre accounted for both Braves runs with solo home runs, the second coming in the bottom of the 13th.

The most-memorable home opener took place in 1974, when Hank Aaron hit No. 715 off Dodgers lefty Al Downing to pass Babe Ruth's career home run record.

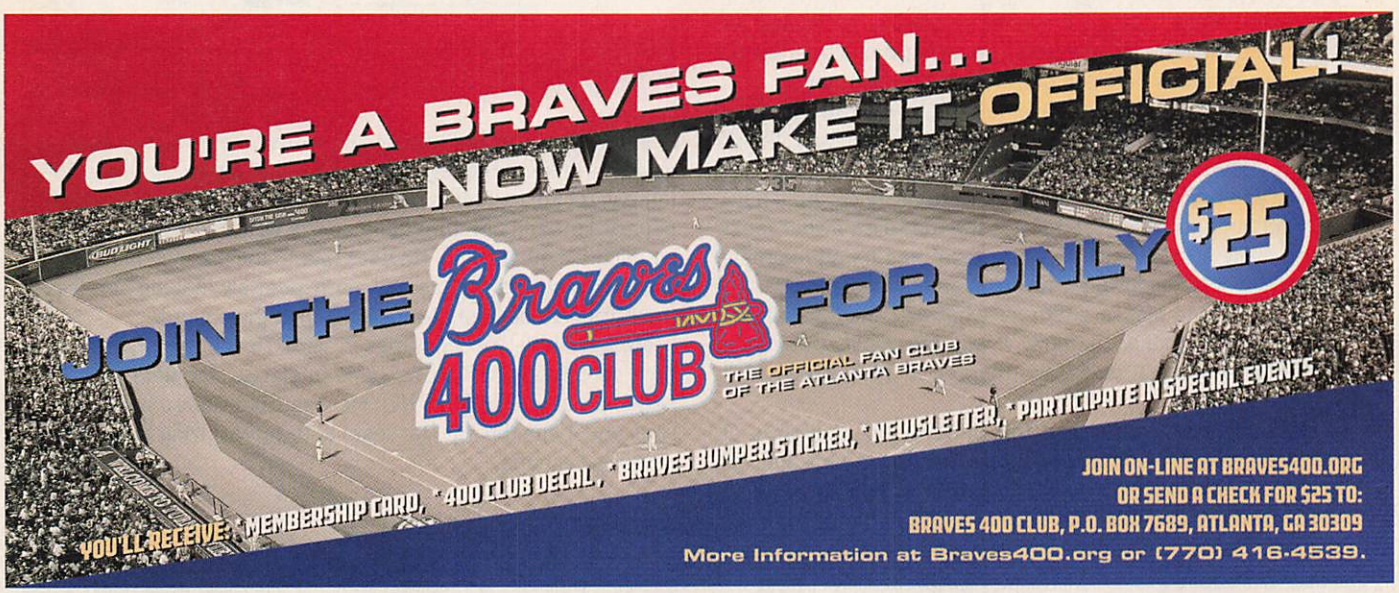
The Great Playoff Run of 1991-2005 began with a 6-4 loss to the Dodgers in 1991. Some guy named Smoltz was on the hill for Atlanta.

The first pitcher to win a game at Turner Field? It was reliever Brad Clontz, in the 1997 home opener, a 5-4 victory over the Cubs. (Remember that. You'll win a trivia night with it someday.)

Glavine is 4-2 in home openers as a Brave, and still gets Opening Day butterflies even after two decades in the game.

"Whether it's Opening Days or a regular start, you have those jitters," Glavine said. "It's a good thing. When you get jittery in anticipation of doing something, it means you care about it. But it's an exercise in trust - if you've done everything you can to get ready, you trust yourself that you can do what you've prepared to do."

Even with F-18s flying overhead... Play ball!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FINDING ANDY

BY GARY CARUSO

THE BRAVES don't open the regular season until the end of March, but college baseball is in full swing. Among a few former Braves coaching in college is Andy Messersmith, the pitcher who in 1976 changed the course of baseball history - with the assistance of Ted Turner.

Messersmith, 62, is the head baseball coach at Cabrillo College, a community college in Aptos, California, located on the Pacific coast, south of San Francisco, between San Jose and Monterey. He just started the third season of his second stint at the school, where he also coached from 1986-91. Last year, the Seahawks were 18-22 overall, 10-15 (fourth place) in the Coast Conference.

Veteran Braves fans are sure to remember Turner signing Messersmith in 1976 - to baseball's first free agent contract - and promptly issuing him uniform No. 17 with the "nickname" Channel on the back to promote his TV station.

Messersmith was one of the game's best pitchers from 1969-75, twice winning 20 games. He started Game 1 of the World Series for the Dodgers in 1974, when he tied Phil Niekro for the league lead in victories.

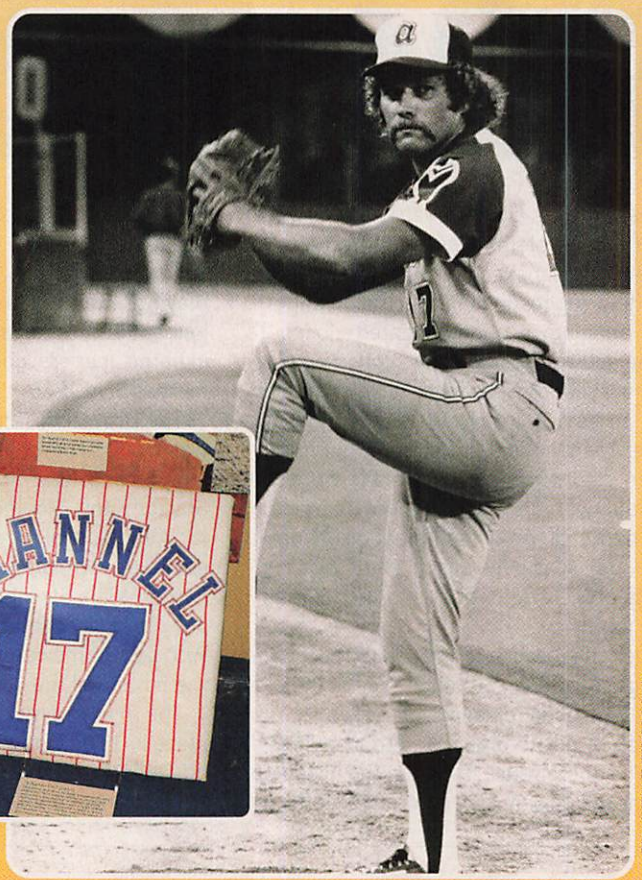
In 1975, Messersmith played without a contract and claimed he thus became a free agent who no longer was subject to the infamous "reserve clause" that basically bound players to their teams for life at that point. Major League Baseball refused to recognize his claim, and the matter went before an arbitration panel set up to handle disputes between players and management.

The panel ruled that the reserve clause was no more than a one-year option, thus making Messersmith and Expos pitcher Dave McNally the first free agents. McNally was injured and retired. Messersmith likely would have found himself without a job if not for Turner, the maverick owner looking to make a splash with his new team and trying to create viewership interest for programming on his TV station.

Turner signed Messersmith for what he called a "lifetime contract" of $1 million. Actually, it was a three-year deal that would be laughed at on today's market. In 1976, however, it was major news.

Messersmith, a product of the University of California at Berkeley, didn't like how the media portrayed him and his quest to break down the reserve clause. He had little to say to the press then, and little has been heard from him since then.

ATLANTA BRAVES


NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

Messersmith's "Channel 17" jersey was quickly removed by Major League Baseball and now is on display in the Braves Museum at Turner Field.

In fact, more than three decades later, he's still not interested in talking publicly. ChopTalk made three attempts to interview him, including one through the Cabrillo journalism department and one through a sports writer in his area, and he declined all of them. He does talk to the press in his area, but only about his players and team, possibly making him the most-reticent college baseball coach in the country.

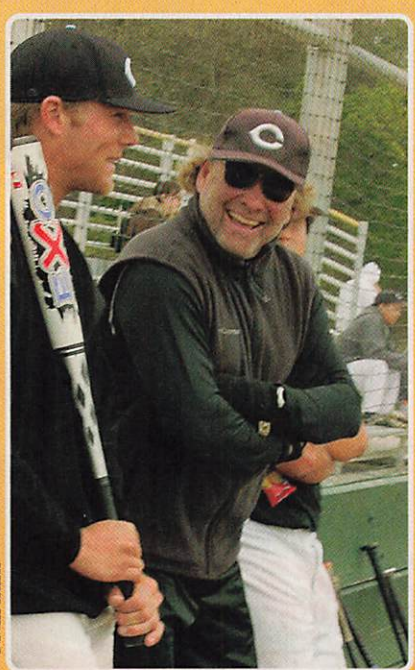
Messersmith won 39 games in 1974-75, led the NL in winning percentage in '74 (.769) and in starts, complete games and shutouts in '75 (40/19/7). He won Gold Gloves both seasons and made the All-Star team both years, giving him three career selections.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

In the '70s and '80s, however, few player acquisitions worked well for the Braves, and this signing fit that description. Messersmith, only 30 when Turner signed him, never really was the same pitcher again, though that was due to injuries, not a lack of talent.

The righthander started slowly in '76. He missed spring training due to contract negotiations and didn't win a game until his seventh start on May 17. In June, he appeared to be the pitcher the Braves thought they were getting - going 5-1 and earning his fourth All-Star selection. He injured a hamstring right before the All-Star break, though, and that - combined with a sore shoulder - hampered him during the second half and he finished 11-11 with a 3.04 ERA in 29 games (28 starts).

Messersmith won just five games in 1977, shutting down after a July 3 elbow injury that required surgery. The Braves sold him to the Yankees, and he pitched briefly and ineffectively for them in '78 and for the Dodgers in '79 before retiring. His career record is 130-99 in 12 seasons, and his 2.86 lifetime ERA and .212 opponents' batting average are strong evidence of the quality of pitcher he was when healthy.

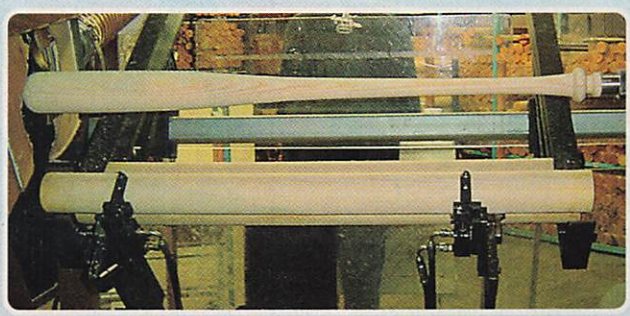


CABRILLO COLLEGE

Messersmith chats with his players at Cabrillo College, but he's not so willing to talk to the press about his pitching career.

HOW DO THEY DO THAT?

MAKE A BAT



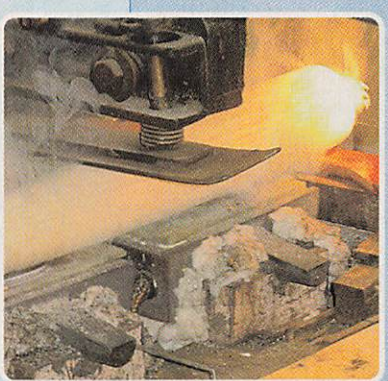
PHOTOS: HILLERICH & BRADSBY CO.

BASEBALL BATS travel a long distance to reach the hands of Braves hitters. The entire transformation from tree to finished product can take anywhere from just over a month to four months.

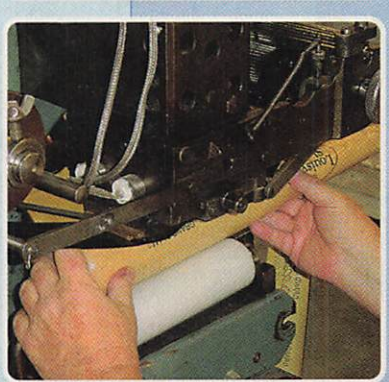
Everything starts with trees located in northern Pennsylvania and New York State. Most bats come from either northern white ash or hard rock maple trees, according to Matt Bynum of Louisville Slugger. Wood from those trees offers the best weight-to-strength properties.

After bat manufacturers fell the trees, they cut the logs into a convenient length for shipping to their milling facilities. There the logs are cut again and processed into "billets." Most billets measure 37 inches long, with a diameter slightly larger than a finished bat.

The billets are stacked and put into drying kilns, where they remain for anywhere from 30 to 45 days. The kilns circulate warm air around the wood to dry it. The wood is then removed from the kilns and goes to a post-processing operation, where the billets are rounded and trimmed. The billets are separated by grade specifications based on the wood's quality. The top grades become professional player bats.



The billets then go into a warehouse for storage until they are brought into the manufacturing facility. Machines called turning lathes transform the billets into bats by cutting down and shaping the wood. The bats are sanded down and have a logo burned into them by an electric branding iron. After they are dipped in finishing lacquer, they're hung to dry. Then they're ready for shipment to professional players, retail stores, and personalized bat sellers.



"We'll take the Atlanta Braves orders and produce those bats for all their players, and then we'll ship those products to their spring training site," said Bynum.

Louisville Slugger, which began making bats in 1884, also fills smaller orders throughout the season from individual major leaguers.

– STEVE FALL

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WE PLAN COVERAGE LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN

BY JEFF GENTHNER
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT & GENERAL MANAGER
FSN SOUTH AND SPORTSOUTH

THE BRAVES made great moves in the off-season, including the acquisition of Tom Glavine and Mark Kotsay and the beginning of Frank Wren's tenure as general manager. Mark Teixeira will be in the lineup all season, and fan favorite Javy Lopez is trying to make a comeback. All of this and much more lead to the promise of a great Braves season.

But there also were many other off-season changes that will enhance how Braves fans throughout metro Atlanta and across the Southeast follow their favorite baseball team this season.

A new generation in Braves' television coverage is here. Beginning with the first spring training telecast on March 10, more than 110 Braves' games will appear on regional sports networks FSN South and SportSouth.

Why is this good news for Braves' fans? Because FSN South and SportSouth will do more than just televise Braves' games. Every game telecast will provide viewers with an entire evening of enhanced and expanded Braves' coverage like they've never before experienced.

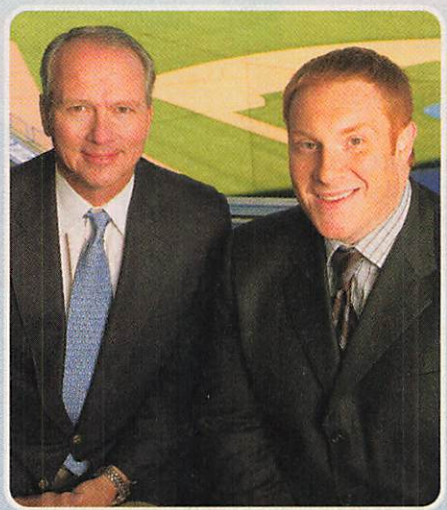
THE MOST GAMES

FSN South and SportSouth coverage of Braves baseball opens with seven spring training games from the newly named Champion Stadium at Disney's Wide World of Sports in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, and continues through the pennant chase in late September.

Combined, our regular season schedule features 106 games, including 47 matchups against National League East opponents. SportSouth is the first place to look for the Braves on TV in 2008, with an expanded lineup of 81 games, and FSN South continues its tradition of being the home of "Wednesday Night Braves" with all 25 of the team's Wednesday games scheduled to air on the network.

And if you can't see the game live, FSN South and SportSouth will provide a same-day, late-night replay of all 106 game telecasts. You'll have more than one chance to catch all the action when games are televised on FSN South or SportSouth!

Join our broadcast team of play-by-play announcer Jon Sciambi (below, R) and analyst Joe Simpson (below, L) for our first spring training telecast on Monday, March 10 at 1 p.m. (Eastern) on SportSouth against the St. Louis Cardinals. Our first regular-season telecast will be on Wednesday, April 2, against the Pittsburgh Pirates at 7 p.m. (Eastern) on FSN South.



THE MOST COVERAGE

FSN South and SportSouth will be the only television outlets with expanded Braves game coverage anchored by *Braves LIVE*. *Braves LIVE* with host Jerome Jurenovich returns with expanded Braves' coverage 30 minutes before and after every game telecast on both FSN South and SportSouth - that's an additional 106 hours of Braves' all-access coverage during the 2008 MLB season.

Jerome will be joined by game-site reporter Katy Temple and a cast of other analysts to provide key game insights and expert analysis.

Game coverage on FSN South and SportSouth will also be enhanced with the debut of "X-Mo" technology. This state-of-the-art, slow-motion technology will allow fans to witness the most subtle nuances of the game that could never be seen in real time - the splintering of a broken bat or the torque on a pitcher's arm as he delivers the ball - all in high-definition clarity.

In addition to expanded Braves LIVE coverage and enhanced production technology, our commitment to producing award-winning original programming has never been stronger. Throughout the season, fans will have an all-access, behind-the-scenes look at Braves players and executives, including Tom Glavine and team president John Schuerholz, in a series of original specials only available on SportSouth.

THE MOST HIGH-DEFINITION

If you're wired for high-definition reception, you'll enjoy the most high-def games this season on FSN South and SportSouth. For the ultimate Braves viewing experience, FSN South and SportSouth are proud to offer more than 60 HD game telecasts during the 2008 season. Throughout metro Atlanta, check out the Braves in HD on Comcast cable channel 848. Outside metro Atlanta, your local cable or satellite service provider can tell you where to find the games.

WHERE TO FIND OUR COVERAGE

Throughout metro Atlanta, you can find FSN South on Comcast cable channel 48 and SportSouth on Comcast channel 53. Check with your local cable provider for channel numbers outside of metro Atlanta.

If you're a satellite subscriber, FSN South is on DirecTV channel 630 and Dish Network channel 420. SportSouth is on DirecTV channel 631 and on Dish Network channel 437. Be sure to check your satellite channel guides for high-def games on both networks.

I look forward to seeing you at the ballpark. But, if you can't get to the game, I hope you enjoy the game at home on FSN South and SportSouth!

Go Braves!

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first in a regular series of columns from the folks at FSN South and SportSouth, who will bring you more Braves telecasts this year than anyone else. Look for their contributions in ChopTalk each month, and be sure to watch for ChopTalk on FSN South and SportSouth, too.

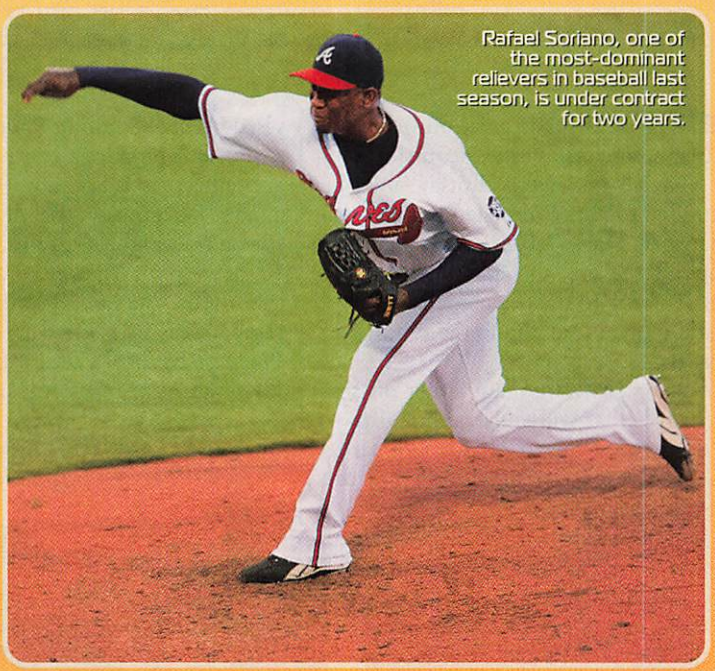
CLOSING THE DEAL

THE BRAVES made a significant move in stabilizing the bullpen for the next two seasons when they signed **Rafael Soriano** to a two-year contract Jan. 24. The 28-year-old power pitcher is in line to be the closer this year and could have been eligible for free agency after the season, which is no longer the case.

Soriano was one of the most-dominant relievers in the National League last year, his first season as a Brave. He was 3-3 with 9 saves (12 chances) and a 3.00 ERA. In 72 innings, he allowed just 47 hits and 15 walks, striking out 70. Opponents hit only .181 against him (.164 vs. LH hitters and .197 vs. RH hitters), fifth-best in the NL, and his on-base percentage allowed of .232 was second in the league.

In his last 17 games, from Aug. 14 until the end of the season, he was 1-0 with an 0.47 ERA and an opponents' batting average of .121 (4-for-4 in save opportunities, 3 walks and 24 strikeouts in 19 1/3 innings).

In 243 career innings, Soriano has given up just 181 hits and 68 walks, striking out 247. Prior to signing the contract, he was eligible for arbitration.



Rafael Soriano, one of the most-dominant relievers in baseball last season, is under contract for two years.

ATLANTA BRAVES

SPRING FORWARD

The Braves' first full squad spring training workout at Disney's Wide World of Sports near Orlando, Fla., was scheduled Feb. 20. See page 31 of this issue for the complete spring training roster.

The exhibition season was scheduled to begin Feb. 27 against the University of Georgia at Disney's Champion Stadium at 1:05 p.m. The Grapefruit League opener is Feb. 28 against the Dodgers at Vero Beach, and the first game at Disney against major league competition is Feb. 29 vs. the Dodgers.

The Braves will wind up the exhibition season with two games at Turner Field, Mar. 28 and 29, against Cleveland. See page 53 of this issue for the complete spring training schedule and ticket information.

ANOTHER LEFTY

The Braves, who in recent years have been short of left-handed relief help, moved to shore up that deficiency Jan. 17 by acquiring **Jeff Ridgway** from the Tampa Bay Rays. Atlanta sent infielder **Willy Aybar** and minor league infielder **Chase Fontaine** to Tampa Bay in the deal.

The 27-year-old Ridgway made his major league debut last year, appearing in three late-season games for the Rays. He spent most of the season at Triple-A Durham, where he was 2-3 with a 3.06 ERA and four saves in 54 games. In 64 2/3 innings, he gave up just 54 hits (8 home runs) and 30 walks, striking out 67. He held left-handed hitters to a .163 batting average. Right-handed batters hit .269 against him.

A 14th-round draft pick by the Rays in 1999, Ridgway has a career minor league record of 24-34 with a 3.58 ERA. He was added to the Braves' 40-man roster, giving them three lefty relief candidates (**Will Ohman** and **Royce Ring**). **Mike Gonzalez** is a fourth once he's recovered from elbow surgery.

Aybar, acquired from the Dodgers with **Danys Baez** for **Wilson Betemit** at the 2006 trade deadline, missed all of last season. He opened the season on the disabled list with a sprained hand, was transferred to the 60-day DL, and eventually had hand surgery in August. He hit .313 with one home run and eight RBIs for the Braves in 36 games in 2006.

Fontaine, 22, was the Braves' second-round pick in the 2006 draft. In two seasons, he hit a combined .280 with seven home runs and 58 RBIs in rookie and Class-A ball.

SUPER SUB

Omar Infante, projected to be the Braves' super utilityman this season, underwent left hand surgery Jan. 18 to repair a break sustained when he was hit by a pitch in a Venezuelan winter league game Jan. 12. Dr. **Gary Lourie**, one of the Braves' team doctors, repaired a mid-shaft fracture of the fifth metacarpal. A pin was placed in the hand. Infante, who was acquired from the Cubs with **Will Ohman** in exchange for reliever **Jose Ascanio** in December, should be ready for baseball activities in mid-March, and he could be ready for the start of the season. He will be the primary back-up for shortstop **Yunel Escobar**, but also can play second base, third base and the outfield.

AVOIDING ARBITRATION

The Braves avoided going to arbitration by signing all eligible players to contracts in advance of the process. Previously eligible players were **Mark Teixeira**, **Rafael Soriano**, **Omar Infante**, **Tyler Yates**, **Mike Gonzalez** and **Matt Diaz**. All signed one-year deals except Soriano, who got a two-year contract.

PAY STUB

According to information released by the Commissioner's office, the Braves' payroll last year was $92,634,468. That ranked 16 out of 30 teams and was eighth in the NL and third in the NL East to the Mets and Phillies. The top payroll in the league was the Dodgers' $125,581,316 (third overall to the Yankees and Red Sox), and the highest in the NL East was the Mets' $120,927,727 (fourth overall). Totals are for 40-man rosters and include bonuses and incentives.

SHORT HOPS

- **Chipper Jones** will be the guest of honor Feb. 22 at a fundraising event for a Daytona Beach group that helps needy families with food. Jones, who is from the Daytona area, will appear at the second "Strike Out Hunger" event by Operation Caring Through Sharing. The event starts at 6 p.m. and includes dinner and a silent auction at The Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona Beach. Tickets are $75. The nonprofit organization matches sponsors with needy families throughout central Florida. About 300 families currently receive food every month. For information, call (386) 676-9406.

- **Frank Wren** spoke at the Albany (Ga.) Area YMCA Jan. 22, and had a newly formed scholarship program named after him by the organization.

- New Braves centerfielder **Mark Kotsay** spoke at the Western Nevada College baseball team fundraiser at the Peppermill Hotel and Casino in Reno, Nev., Jan. 18. Prior to the banquet, Kotsay spend 30 minutes speaking privately to the players and answering their questions.

- **John Smoltz** was the featured speaker at the Furman baseball fundraiser (Upstate Diamond Classic) Jan. 23 in Greenville, S.C.

IMPROVING YOUNG PLAYERS WILL BE A "HIDDEN ADDITION"

THIS IS A VERY EXCITING TIME. Spring training is always exciting, but for me, it's even more so this year because it's my first spring training as general manager of the Atlanta Braves. It's a chance to see the players we assembled during the off-season on the field together for the first time. It's an extremely special time for me.

This spring we have two or three areas of the club that we're really focused on trying to get answers about.

One is starting pitching and primarily the health of Mike Hampton. Mike says his arm feels great as we start spring training. He still has a little tightness in his hamstring, but that's normal at this point and doesn't affect his pitching. By the time we start playing games, he should have all that tightness worked out.

Two is Mark Kotsay and seeing his recovery from the back ailments that have bothered him the last few years. Mark is very excited and says he feels really good and ready to go.

Our doctors feel like his back is sufficiently healed that he should be able to play pretty much every day.

We just need to be smart and give him some days off here and there - day game after a night game, that sort of thing. From the standpoint of having him play 130 to 140 games, it should not be a problem. But it's probably not a good idea to have him play 145 to 150 games.

Three, I suppose, is to see if Javy Lopez can, in fact, resurrect his career and make the club as our backup catcher.

And one of the most exciting things about spring training every year is to see the continued improvement of young players you already have on the team - Brian McCann, Jeff Francoeur, Kelly Johnson, Yunel Escobar. That's a "hidden addition" to the team.

> "ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING ASPECTS OF SPRING TRAINING (IS) SEEING YOUNG PLAYERS TURN POTENTIAL INTO TALENT AND PRODUCTION."

Their stats may not change dramatically, but it shows in their production - when they get their RBIs, with the game on the line or when we're up or down five runs.

That's the maturation process with young players, and it's one of the most exciting aspects of spring training - seeing young players turn potential into talent and production. I truly believe that's one area where we'll see a lot of improvement in the club this year.

Omar Infante is recovering from a broken hand and should be resuming baseball activities and getting closer to full speed shortly. We hope he'll be ready for Opening Day or shortly thereafter.

We signed Rafael Soriano for two years. He pitched so well last year and has been one of the more dominant relievers in baseball over the last two years. We may extend him beyond that, but by buying out his first year of free agency (2009), we can let some of our younger relievers develop and get themselves better able to handle roles late in the game. We're very confident in Rafael.

We recently acquired left-handed reliever Jeff Ridgway from Tampa Bay. He's got very good stuff and has some options left, which gives us flexibility with his roster spot. He's been in the minors awhile, but it sometimes takes lefthanders longer to develop. He's been pretty dominant the last couple of years, and we like him. If he makes the team, great. If not, he gives us some depth at Triple A.

At the end of this month, we have two very special days, back-to-back. It's an unusual situation. We'll be in Washington, D.C., for the opening of the Nationals' new ballpark March 30, and we know that will be a really big event. Then we fly back to Atlanta for the home opener the next night, and that's always the biggest game of the year.

GOOD JOE

JOE SIMPSON, a native of Oklahoma, returned to his home state Jan. 30 to accept the **Bill Teegins** Excellence in Broadcasting Award from the Oklahoma Sports Museum. The presentation was part of the ninth annual **Warren Spahn** Award Gala in Guthrie, Okla. Simpson played college baseball at the University of Oklahoma before embarking on a nine-year career as a major league player. He will call Braves games for the second year on FSN South and SportSouth. It is his 17th season as a Braves broadcaster.

Cleveland Indians ace **C.C. Sabathia** received the Spahn Award, named after the Braves Hall of Famer who is the winningest lefthander in history, as the majors' best lefty in 2007 based on a formula of wins, ERA and strikeouts.

RICHARD CLIFTON

Joe Simpson accepts the broadcasting award named after the late Bill Teegins from Teegins' wife, Janis, and daughter, Amanda.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

BE SURE TO CHECK the schedule and broadcast listings for Braves starting times this year, because there have been several changes. Most weekday home games, including the Mar. 31 home opener, will start at 7:10 p.m. (Eastern), and Sunday games at Turner Field will start at 1:35 p.m. The changes were made due to suggestions from the fans, according to the Braves. Friday games will continue to start at 7:35 p.m.

Most Saturday home games will begin at 7:10 p.m. However, if Fox selects a Saturday game for its Game of the Week package, the time will be 3:55 p.m. The first two home Saturday games of the season - April 5 vs. the Mets and April 19 vs. the Dodgers - will be carried on Fox and begin at 3:55 p.m.

To test how many families will bring their children to the ballpark right after school, the Braves will begin the Aug. 18 game against the Giants at 4:35 p.m.

The Braves have four other scheduled afternoon weekday games (1:10 p.m. starts) - May 8 vs. the Padres, May 26 vs. the Diamondbacks, June 4 vs. the Marlins, and June 25 vs. the Brewers.

Starting times are tentative, so watch for changes in ChopTalk, at braves.com, and in broadcast listings.

EARLY GLIMPSE

Fans who are eager to see how the Braves look in spring training will have quite a few opportunities to do so on television. Beginning with the 1:05 p.m. game Feb. 29 against the Dodgers at Disney's Wide World of Sports, 11 exhibition games are scheduled to be shown.

ESPN will televise the Feb. 29 game, as well as the Mar. 27 date (1:05 p.m.) with the Mets at Disney. SportSouth will show three games, the first of them on Mar. 10 against St. Louis at Disney (1:05 p.m.). FSN South has four games scheduled, starting Mar. 11 (7:05 p.m.) against Washington at Disney. And Peachtree TV, available only in metro Atlanta, will show the two exhibition games at Turner Field against Cleveland (Mar. 28 at 7:10 p.m. and Mar. 29 at 1:10 p.m.).

All the games due to be televised are noted on the spring training schedule on page 53 of this issue.

SCOUTS' HONOR

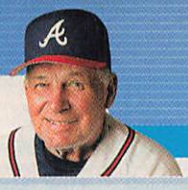
Bobby Cox and Braves Hall of Fame executive **Bill Bartholomay** were among the honored at the Professional Baseball Scouts Foundation Fifth Annual "In the Spirit of the Game" dinner and World's Largest Auction of Sports Memorabilia Jan. 19 at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza in Los Angeles.

Commissioner **Bud Selig** was on hand to present the Executive Leadership Award, named in his honor, to Bartholomay, chairman emeritus of the Braves. Cox received the **Tommy Lasorda** Managers Award.

The event raises money to help scouts who have fallen on hard times. TV personality **Mary Hart** and comedian **Tim Allen** served as co-hosts. Brewers broadcaster **Bob Uecker**, whose lesser credits include limited duty as a Braves catcher (1962-63, '67), introduced Selig.

UP NORTH

Scott Thorman returned to his former elementary school in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada, along with former Brave **Pete Orr**, on Jan. 19 to start a Winterball program and tell the students about professional baseball. Thorman and Orr answered questions in an assembly at Preston Public School and participated in a clinic with plastic balls and bats. Thorman came to the school with his wife, **Kelly**, and 10-month-old son **Robbie**. Winterball is a program put on by Major League Baseball and Baseball Canada to spark interest in baseball. Each winter, a Canadian major leaguer returns to his former elementary school.



FREE STUFF

Mark your schedule for these giveaway dates scheduled this season at Turner Field.

APRIL 4-5 VS. METS
Magnetic Schedules (Georgia Power)
APRIL 23 VS. MARLINS
Bobby Cox Bobbleheads (Coca-Cola)
MAY 7 VS. PADRES
Braves Visors (NAPA)
MAY 21 VS. METS
Mark Teixeira Bobbleheads (Coca-Cola)
MAY 22 VS. METS
Braves Carry-On Bags (Delta)
JUNE 4 VS. MARLINS
Jeff Francoeur T-shirts (Delta)
JUNE 25 VS. BREWERS
Brian McCann Bobbleheads (Coca-Cola)
JULY 2 VS. PHILLIES
Tom Glavine T-shits (Delta)
JULY 30 VS. CARDINALS
Braves Hats (NAPA)
AUG. 2 VS. BREWERS
Rally Flags (NAPA)
AUG. 13 VS. CUBS
Chipper Jones T-shirts (Delta)
AUG. 26 VS. MARLINS
Braves Hats (NAPA)
AUG. 27 VS. MARLINS
Tim Hudson Bobbleheads (Coca-Cola)
SEPT. 10 VS. ROCKIES
John Smoltz T-shirts (Delta)
SEPT. 17 VS. PHILLIES
Braves Winter Caps (NAPA)

BALLS & STRIKES

- **John Smoltz** was chosen Sports Person of the Year at the 2008 Atlanta Sports Awards black-tie event held Feb. 11 at the Fox Theater. **Chipper Jones** was one of three finalists for Pro Athlete of the Year. The awards are presented by the Atlanta Sports Council.

- **Jeff Francoeur** spoke to hundreds of high school baseball players Jan. 29 at the old Central Middle School auditorium in Thomasville, Ga.

- Former Braves **Ryan Klesko** and **Jeff Treadway** and senior baseball advisor **Bobby Dews** were among the athletes who participated in the 22nd Annual Quail Unlimited Celebrity Quail Hunt Jan. 24-27 in Albany, Ga.

OUR DIVISION IS TOUGH, BUT WE ARE STRONGER

THE GREAT THING about watching our pitchers warming up at Turner Field in early February was that no one had a bad arm. We're really excited to see what these guys do once the spring training games start.

I watched John Smoltz throw off the mound, and he was the most impressive of all the pitchers! It had been a long time since I watched Tom Glavine throw early in the year, and I think he's throwing better than ever. And now he has a curveball that looks great.

Mike Hampton reported that he felt great. He's doing everything he can to be back this year. Whatever happens though, this is a team that has a lot of pitching depth, more than we've had in years.

I think it's great that we have Rafael Soriano signed for the next two years. He's a young guy with a terrific arm and makeup. I couldn't be more delighted that he's our closer.

Last year we saw good work out of Peter Moylan, and I think every club would love to have a guy like that. Fans might not know who he is yet, but there are 29 other teams that do.

A guy who came on strong last year is Manny Acosta. He's been under a lot of people's radar, but he throws 96 to 97 miles per hour and has a hard slider.

We have so many excellent pitchers that I know I'm leaving some out, but it's because we have so much depth.

I know our fans are very excited about the possibility of Javy Lopez returning to the team. I watched him catch several pitchers - Tim Hudson, Peter Moylan and Chris Resop, all hard-throwers who have a lot of movement on their pitches. He was right there with them.

> "THERE ARE NO REAL BIG QUESTION MARKS AS WE GO INTO SPRING TRAINING... IT'S A STRONG TEAM."

Chino Cadahia and Eddie Perez put in a lot of time this off-season working with Javy, and Javy made the commitment to try to come back. So we'll see what happens. If working hard and getting yourself into tremendous shape counts for anything, he's done everything he could.

Omar Infante, an infielder we got from the Cubs, broke his hand during winter ball and had to have surgery. He's set to come back, probably in mid-March. We don't want to rush him, but it would be great to have him back then or even earlier.

In my conversation with (centerfielder) Mark Kotsay right after we traded to get him, he told me how good he was feeling. He had back surgery last year. It was nothing major, but he came back too quickly and it hurt him. He's doing great now. I've seen him play through the years, and everyone I know who has experience with him has told me what a good guy he is to have in your organization.

There was a lot of talk once Johan Santana signed with the Mets that everything shifted in their favor in our division. I think they had a good team without adding Santana. Our division is tough, but our team is able to compete because we absolutely are stronger than we were last year.

There are no real big question marks as we go into spring training for one major reason. At the end of last season, we talked about what we needed, the question marks, and Frank Wren went out and filled every single one of our needs. Everything we set out to do, from starting pitching to bullpen to position players, was done. It's a strong team now, but we will get stronger through spring training.

PLAYING PEPPER

CHIPPER JONES

INTERVIEW BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

CHOPTALK You turn 36 on April 24. How do you feel, physically?

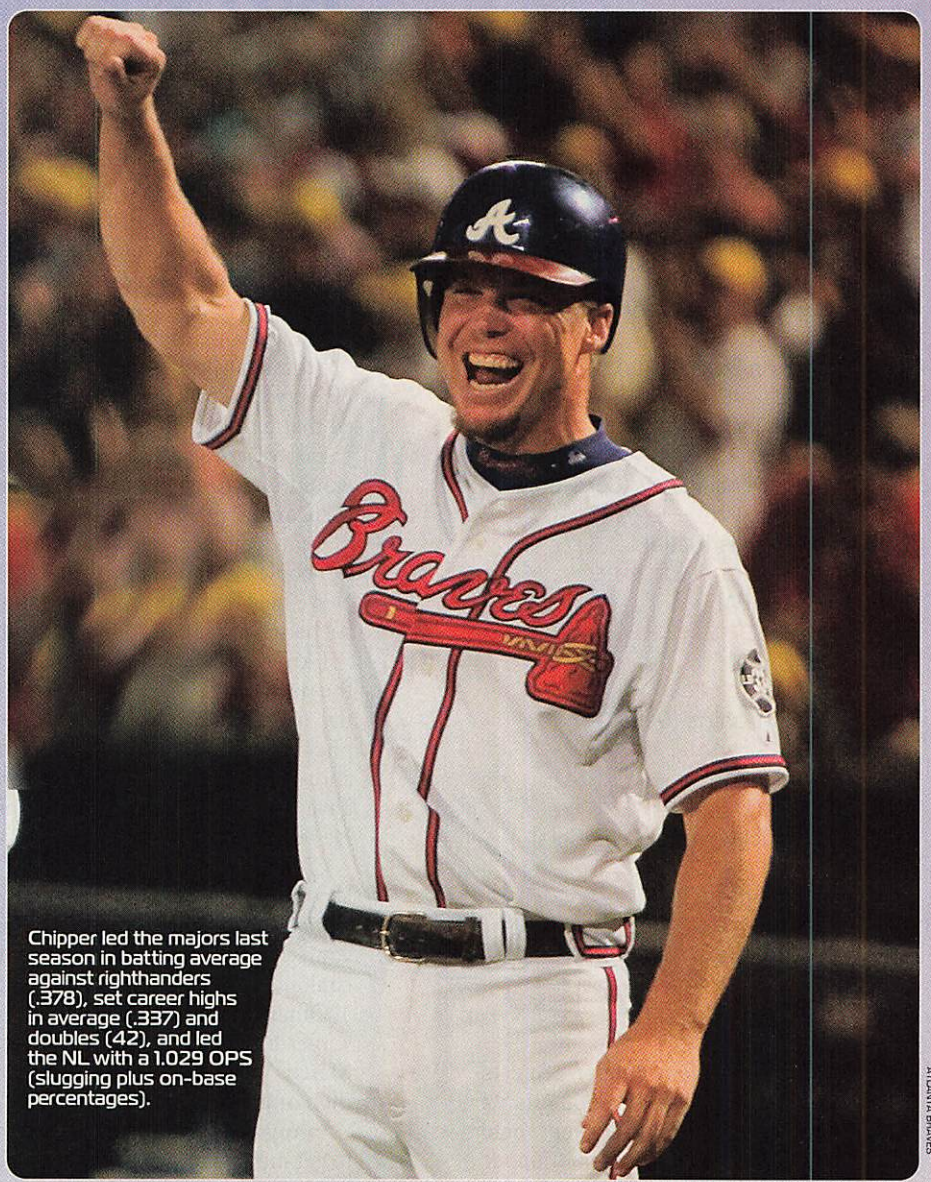
CHIPPER JONES I feel great, physically. My hands (injured May 11 when landing on them after leaping over Pittsburgh third baseman Jose Bautista trying to avoid a tag) stopped hurting in December. It took about six months, all told, but they're fine. I don't feel pain at all when I swing the bat. I've had the normal aches and pains getting ready for the upcoming season, but nothing out of the ordinary. I think last season was an eye-opener for me. I was able to see that my body could bounce back. It wasn't my body that broke down. It was a freak incident that hurt my hands, and my body didn't break down. It was a real confidence booster for me. I put up good numbers and only played in 134 games. If I'd had another month of stats, I would have had a career year at age 35. That kind of re-lit the fire for me.

CT Looking at 2007 and comparing it to your 1999 MVP season, would you say last year was even better than your MVP year?

JONES There's no question that last year was better than my MVP year. There's no doubt that with another 25 games, I could have eclipsed everything I'd done in 1999. My overall numbers would have been better. Even though I played in only 134 games, I still managed to get a few MVP votes.

CT Although you missed 28 games, you still managed to be among the league leaders in several categories, including second in batting average .337 and a .604 slugging percentage. What did you do differently that gave you the endurance to push through the wall and perform well while injured?

JONES It was just one of those years when the ball maybe goes a foot further and drops out of reach, or goes over a wall. There were catches that weren't made. A lot of things went well for me. I'd hit a Texas leaguer that would just fall in. The biggest thing was that I didn't hit any extended slump. You can't hit .320, .340 and go through a 2-30 slump at the plate. I was able to put together good enough at-bats when I wasn't hitting great so that, when I came of the disabled list, my average stood at .300. I hadn't even been hitting the ball that well, but then I started to, and I already had the foundation of a .300 average.



Chipper led the majors last season in batting average against righthanders (.378), set career highs in average (.337) and doubles (42), and led the NL with a 1.029 OPS (slugging plus on-base percentages).

ATLANTA BRAVES

> "IF I'D HAD ANOTHER MONTH OF STATS, I WOULD HAVE HAD A CAREER YEAR AT AGE 35. THAT KIND OF RE-LIT THE FIRE FOR ME."

CT Other than when you were injured, you never seemed awkward or uncomfortable at the plate last year. Did you have the sense that any time you were up to bat, you were going to get a hit?

JONES It's all about my approach. The calmer and quieter I am at the plate, the better the result will be. My goal last year was to be relaxed and let the ball get deep in the zone. I think last year it looked like I was calm and confident, but it was really

the "duck in the water" thing. I would look calm, but underneath I was working, working!

CT You came so close to getting the batting title (.337 was second to Matt Holliday's .340). Were you disappointed that you didn't get it?

> "I'VE GROWN UP A LOT AND HAVE A LOT OF FUN PLAYING NOW. THE YOUNGER GUYS ON OUR TEAM HAVE BEEN GOOD FOR ME."

JONES Not at all, because it was my best year, batting average-wise. And can I tell you how many different guys could win the batting title if there wasn't a major league team in Colorado! Seriously, I have the utmost respect for guys like Larry Walker, Dante Bichette, Todd Helton and Matt Holliday. In fact, I think Holliday should have won the MVP, but there are enough voters who don't put stock in the fact that he plays in Colorado. I had a chance to play with Holliday on Team USA in the World Baseball Classic, and it's one of those things that if you have to "lose out" to a guy, he's the kind of guy you want it to be. He's a good kid, and he's worked his tail off to take his game to another level.

CT You seem to be so much more comfortable in your own skin these days?

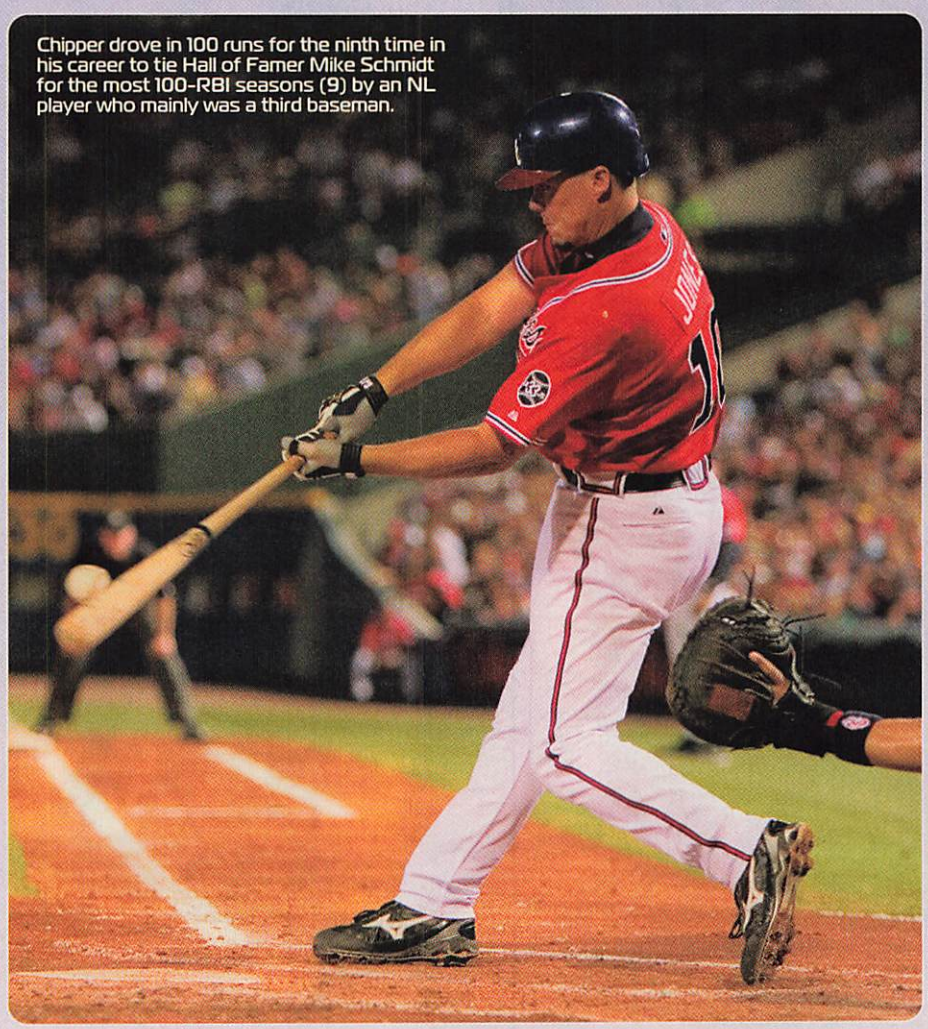
JONES I've grown up a lot and have a lot of fun playing now. The younger guys on our team have been good for me. They needed me to be a mentor, and they've got infectious personalities. Having them around has re-invigorated me. There was more of a need for me to be there, and not just between the lines, playing the game. I need to be in the cage talking to hitters. I need to be in Kelly Johnson's and Yunel Escobar's ears, talking about defense. I needed to be a leader and let them know that I'll be a rock in the middle of the lineup and do all the things I've been doing all these years.

CT You've watched this team with ages skewing older, and ages skewing younger. It seems to be moderating?

JONES You're right. When I was coming up, there were a ton of older guys, actually a lot of leaders and not many Indians. There was no "one guy" leading the ballclub, except maybe Terry Pendleton and that was before I got here. By the time I came up, there was Tom Glavine, John Smoltz, David Justice, Rafael Belliard, Marquis Grissom, Ron Gant, Greg Maddux, you name it. All these incredibly talented guys, who really worked at their craft and all the same type of guy in terms of the way they thought about the game. Then the last few years, it's been two of us (older guys) - John Smoltz working with and talking to the young pitchers and me with the position players. But we have great young players, very mature about the way they approach the game.

CT Are you pleased with the moves made by general manager Frank Wren this off-season?

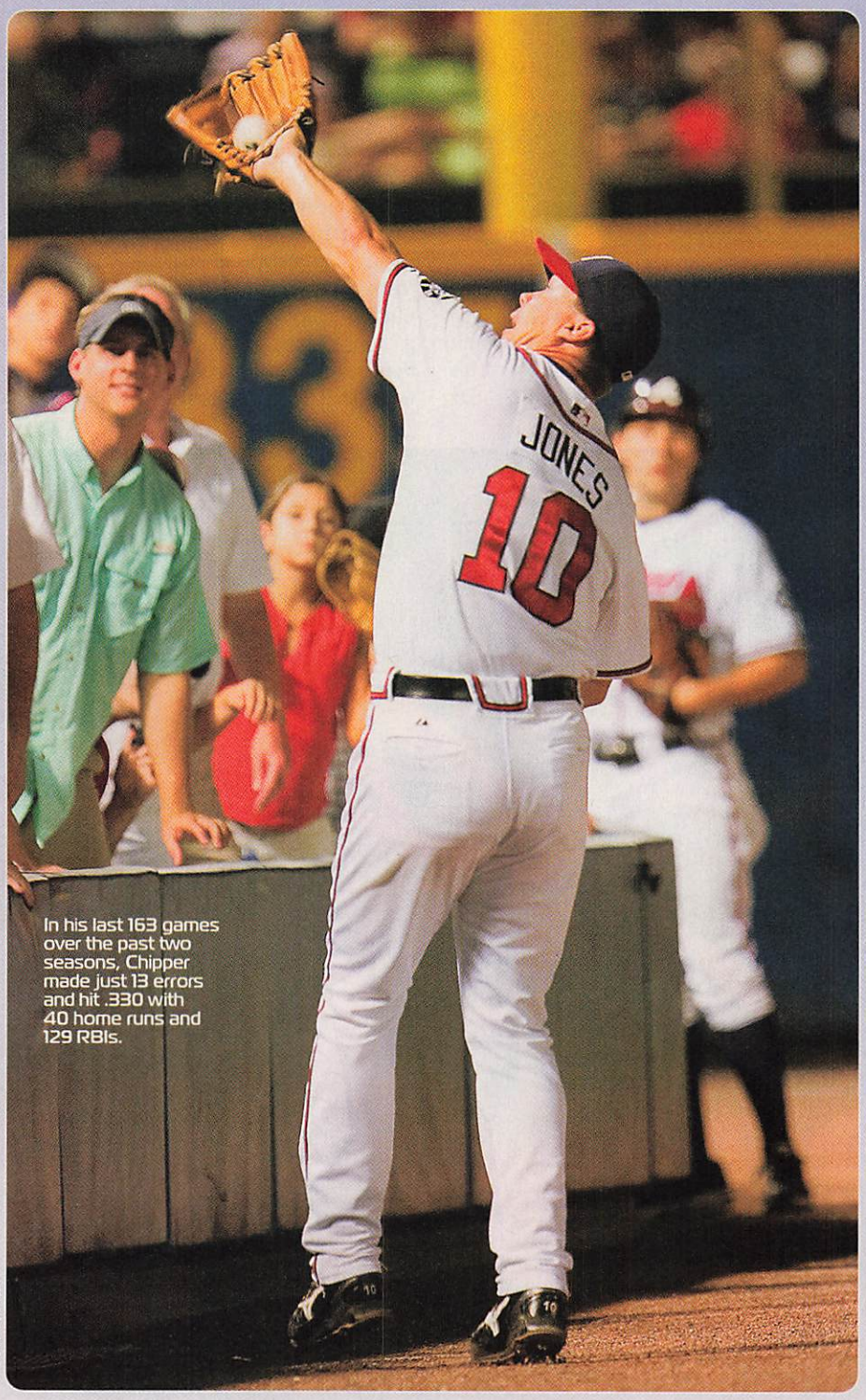
JONES You know, I think fans and players want to see an active front office, and you've certainly seen that this off-season. We may not be seeing the "sexy" pickup for pitching or the bench, but when it comes down to evaluating talent and character, there's no team or organization better than the Braves. Getting Mark Kotsay was a tremendous pickup. He's as professional a ballplayer as they come. He works hard every game, gets three or four good at-bats every night. He's



Chipper drove in 100 runs for the ninth time in his career to tie Hall of Famer Mike Schmidt for the most 100-RBI seasons (9) by an NL player who mainly was a third baseman.

ATLANTA BRAVES

not as flashy a defensive player as Andruw Jones was, but he's a quality outfielder and a quality guy. Glavine coming back is huge. If he can give us 200 quality innings and give the team another guy to get us more innings before hitting up the bullpen, that's just what this team needed. Then we have the great problem of having four or five guys competing for innings in the four and five spots (in the rotation). We'll see if it's gonna be Mike Hampton, it would be great to get something from him, or Chuck James, who is established at the back end (of the rotation). Then we have these unknown kids, to the fans, that aren't unknown to us. I'm really impressed with Jair Jurrjens. I watched him pitch late last year, and he looks good. I'm pretty optimistic.



In his last 163 games over the past two seasons, Chipper made just 13 errors and hit .330 with 40 home runs and 129 RBIs.

ATLANTA BRAVES

CT But aren't you always optimistic at this time of year?

JONES We're all optimistic, and that's been the good thing about John (Schuerholz) in the past and Frank, now. They give you that feeling of hope, that we can be competitive. We didn't make the playoffs the last two years, but we could have competed, especially if we had had the pitching. In 2006, it was the bullpen. In 2007, our starting rotation struggled. Smoltz and Tim Hudson felt like they had to pitch seven innings to save the bullpen, and if they got lit up, our bullpen was wrecked for five days. Just one more solid guy last year could have made a difference. But I think we've addressed those issues. We have a competitive team.

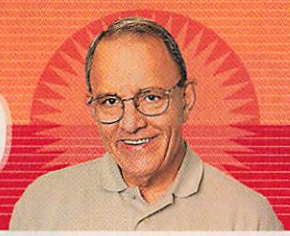
CT How about you? Technically, this is the last year of your guaranteed contract, with the option in 2009 tied to performance incentives.

JONES Yeah, those incentive numbers, from the last three seasons, are actually averaged and so once the numbers are hit, the option is picked up. I think it's a given that I'll meet those numbers.

CT So do you see yourself playing after 2009, and if so, for how long?

JONES As I sit here, right now, I can tell you I definitely want to play past (age) 37. I have the fire and desire to go out and play. I still enjoy coming to the ballpark. I believe that I can still play at the highest level of competition as anyone else. But if I couldn't go out and hit third (in the lineup) and play third for the Atlanta Braves... well... I've been a three-hole hitter my whole life, from Little League to the major leagues. (Chuckles) If Bobby Cox came to me and said, "Chip, we're dropping you to five or six in the lineup," I think I'd have to say, "Skip, it's been fun, old buddy, but I don't think I want to do that."

SKIP



CARAY CORNER

BRAVES CAN COMPETE WITH PHILLIES AND METS

THE 2008 SEASON is almost upon us, and it would seem that the Phillies, Mets and Braves are the class of the division. Here are some of the questions that have to be answered about all three clubs to ascertain whether or not they can win the NL East.

PHILLIES: They were good enough to win the division a year ago despite several devastating injuries. Any team with Ryan Howard, Jimmy Rollins and Chase Utley is going to score a lot of runs.

But: How much are the Phils going to miss Aaron Rowand in center field? Can Shane Victorino replace him as the everyday centerfielder?

Even more importantly, which Brad Lidge will show up in the bullpen? Will it be the tentative Lidge of the last couple of years in Houston, or will it be the dominating Lidge who many thought was the best relief pitcher in the league a couple of years ago.

How much will third baseman Pedro Feliz benefit from the tiny ballpark and the hot weather of a summer in Philly? It's got to be better for him than the wind that blows in San Francisco.

A couple of other thoughts about Philadelphia: As good as new Mets ace Johann Santana is, is he that much better than young lefty Cole Hamels? This could be a breakout year for Hamels.

Also, is Jimmy Rollins the best all-around player in the league? If not, he comes awfully close.

METS: If Johann Santana is healthy, he is a tremendous addition for New York. He figures to be a 20-game winner... but his disappointing last two months of 2007 raise questions about his health.

Is John Maine as good a pitcher as he was last year? Same question can be asked about Oliver Perez.

At age 36, how much gas does Carlos Delgado have left in his tank? Some scouts felt that last year his bat really slowed down.

Who is going to play second base and how well? Can Jose Reyes bounce back from a horrible final month and be the impact player he has been for the rest of his young career? Can 41-year-old Moises Alou stay healthy enough to play 130 or so games?

EDITOR'S NOTE

Skip Caray writes in this space every other month. Watch for him again in May.

New York is good, but they don't appear to have a whole lot of depth. I think the bad taste of their 2007 collapse down the stretch will be negated by the excitement of the Santana signing and that they will contend. But if they get off to a slow start, their fans will suddenly remember the disappointment of last year and turn on them.

BRAVES: Starting pitching figures to be a lot better, but the advanced age of Tom Glavine, John Smoltz and Mike Hampton causes a little concern. Unlike a year ago, the Braves now have plenty of options for potential starters to round out the rotation.

The bullpen, which two years ago was horrible, is now one of the strong points. There are a lot of good young arms out there and a goodly amount of experience, as well.

Other questions: How is a platoon between Brandon Jones and Matt Diaz going to work in left? How many games will Chipper Jones play? If his health is good, he figures to have a hellacious year.

Yunel Escobar should do fine at shortstop. Kelly Johnson figures to be even better at second base.

Mark Teixeira is healthy and a tremendous hitter. Mark Kotsay's health seems to be good, so he'll play center, and Jeff Francoeur and Brian McCann figure to be even better as they mature.

What it all boils down to is that the Braves are a team with no big weaknesses.

Virtually all the writers and "experts" are arguing about whether the Phillies or Mets will win the division. That's fine with Atlanta. The Braves are quietly getting ready to mount a serious challenge. It should be a heckuva race.

On a personal note... for the first time in 33 years, I will miss spring training because of some nagging health problems. But I'll be back to do more than 130 games (most of them with Pete Van Wieren on Braves radio) once the regular season gets underway. I'm looking forward to what should be a very exciting and competitive 2008.

KYB KNOW YOUR BRAVES

MATT DIAZ #23

2007 STATISTICS

AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB
.338	135	358	44	121	21	0	12	45	16	63	4

BASICS

FULL NAME	MATTHEW E. DIAZ
POSITION	Leftfielder
VITALS	Bats/Throws .....Right/Right Height .....6-1 Weight.....205 Age 30
BORN	March 3, 1978 Portland, Oregon
CONTRACT	Signed through 2008
ACQUIRED	By trade from the Kansas City Royals Dec. 19, 2005, in exchange for righthander Ricardo Rodriguez.
PERSONAL	Married (Leslee); son (Nathan, age 1).

CAREER

EXPERT WOODSMAN
Batted a combined .333 over the last two seasons, tied for second in the majors (min. 600 at-bats) to Ichiro Suzuki's .336.

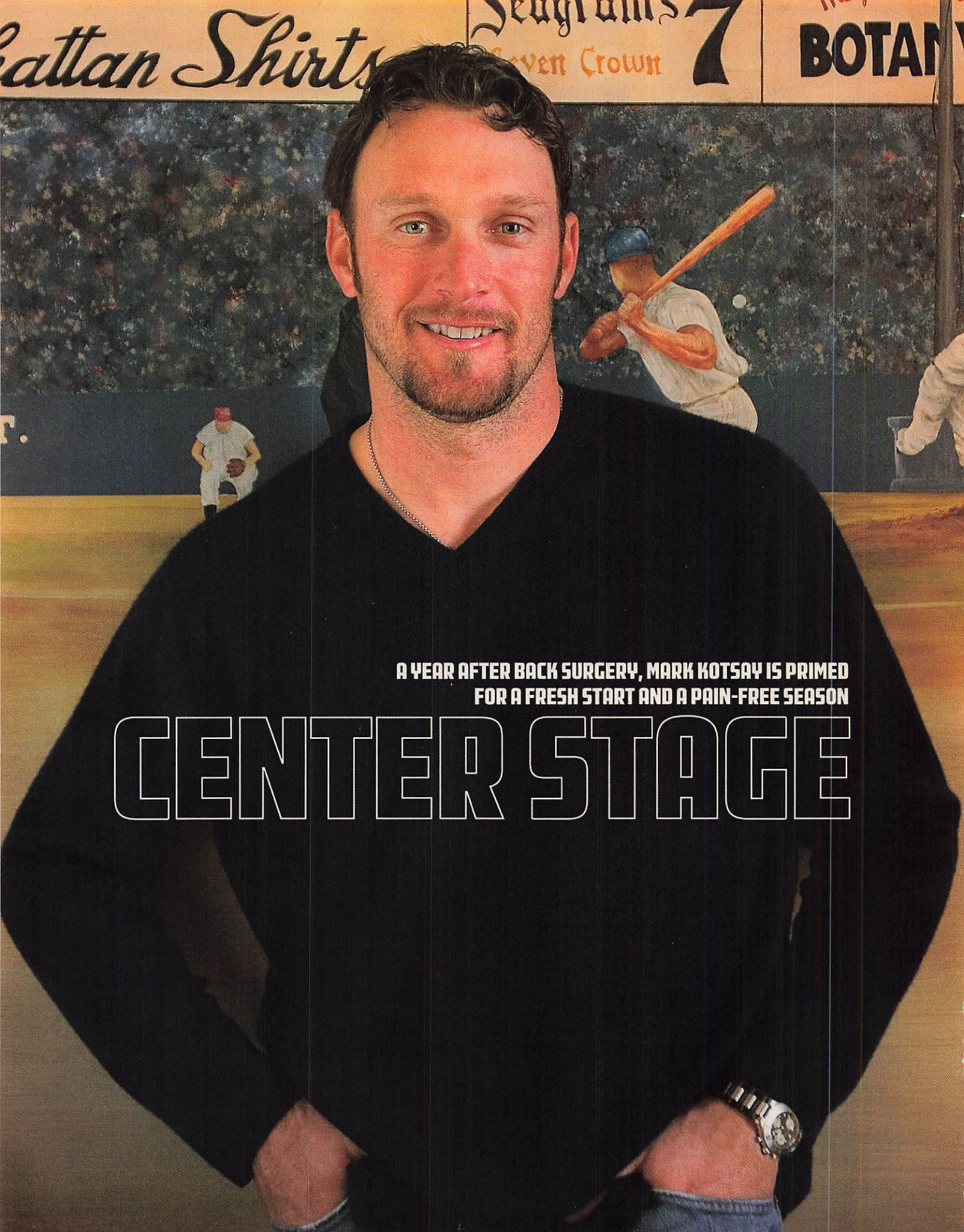
PERFECT 10
Tied NL record and performed an Atlanta first by getting 10 straight hits Aug. 12-14, 2006.

IN A PINCH
Tied for fourth in the majors with 14 pinch-hits (14-for-48, .292) last year, and tied for ninth in the majors with 13 pinch-hits in '06 (13-for-43, .302), tying a franchise record by hitting safely in five straight pinch at-bats.

MINOR SENSATION
In 2003, led entire Tampa Bay organization with .354 average, second-best in all the minors and second-best in the Rays' minor league history.

PHOTO

ALISON SHARPE/FS



A YEAR AFTER BACK SURGERY, MARK KOTSAY IS PRIMED FOR A FRESH START AND A PAIN-FREE SEASON

CENTER STAGE

BY GARY CARUSO

For a guy coming off back surgery and a career-worst season, Mark Kotsay is smiling a lot these days. That's good news for Braves fans and pretty big news around the Kotsay house, too, because smiling is not one of his favorite things to do.

"I don't have a good smile," said the Braves' new centerfielder at his home in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., just north of San Diego. "If it's natural, it's okay. But if someone tells me to smile, it doesn't look right. I always have a crooked lip or something, so I don't do it."

The result is that when he's photographed, Kotsay often wears an expression of a man who just took a 95-mph fastball to the knee. At the Oakland A's photo day last spring training, when posing for his mug shot and holding the required name placard, he wrote on the sign, "I'm not smiling." And he didn't.

Just don't take it personally.

"I can look angry and actually be very happy," said the friendly and easy-going Kotsay, who with his equally engaging wife, Jamie, graciously - and both bare-footed - opened their fabulous home and life to ChopTalk before he ever put on a Braves uniform.

And why wouldn't he be happy now?

Because Kotsay believes his back, which caused him considerable pain in recent seasons, is healthier and stronger than it's been in a long time.

"Hopefully, my (back) history is behind me," he said, intending no pun.

"I'm doing my normal weight-lifting routine, and I'm real encouraged. This is the first time in two years that I've been able to be aggressive in the weight room and build strength. The last two years was mainly rehab. I couldn't do much weight work because it was too much tension on my back. I've done the due diligence, and now I'm looking forward to a healthy year. It's going to be fun."

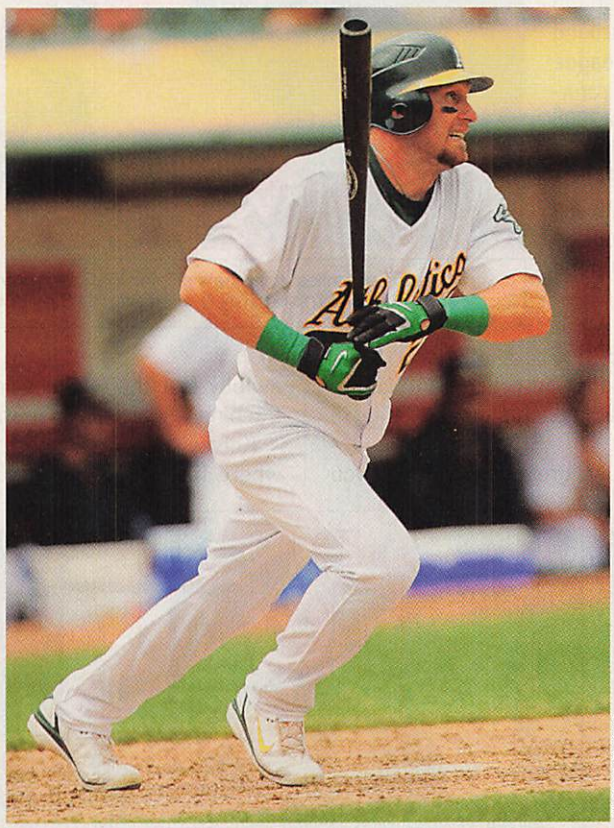
Kotsay, acquired from Oakland Jan. 14 in exchange for reliever Joey Devine and minor league righthander Jamie Richmond, had back surgery last March 8. The microdiscectomy, which required a small incision in the lower back, was to remove bone fragments that had broken off a disk. He was walking within three hours but began the season on the disabled list, wasn't activated until June 1, and had to shut down his game Aug. 15 for the rest of the year due to continued discomfort.

"Looking back, I came back a little soon," he said. "It probably wasn't the best decision. But at the time, I thought I needed to do it."

In 56 games, he hit just .214 with one home run and 20 RBIs. That's a far cry from his .282 career average (peaked at .314 in 2004 and had personal highs of 17 home runs in '02 for San Diego and 82 RBIs in '05 for Oakland).

Kotsay has discussed recovery from ruptured disk surgery with veteran free agent outfielder Steve Finley, who lives near Kotsay and had a similar procedure performed after the 2000 season. Finley was able to bounce back strong in 2001, but he had surgery in November, giving him three more months to prepare for the season than Kotsay had last year.

"Last season was a lot of ups and downs," Kotsay said. "There are a lot of expectations in Atlanta. They win. I can't hit .214 this year. I'm looking forward to the season."



OAKLAND ATHLETICS

Kotsay has batted leadoff and second much of his career, and his ability to make contact makes him a good candidate to hit second in the Atlanta lineup.

Kotsay is a competitor, a winner who is well-respected around baseball for the way he plays the game, as well as for his leadership skills. He was a national champion BMX racer (off-road bicycles) at age 6, the national college player of the year at Cal State-Fullerton in 1995, and the amateur player of the year (Golden Spikes Award) in '96 when he also played in the Olympics in Atlanta and was the Florida Marlins' No. 1 draft pick (ninth overall).

It didn't take Kotsay long to reach the majors - but he had a hard time getting there. After the '96 Olympics, he had time for just 17 games of Class A ball that year. He jumped to Double A in '97 and was first called up by the Marlins on July 11.

"We were in Akron, Ohio, and I was taking a taxi to the airport at 4 o'clock in the morning," Kotsay said. "The taxi got a flat tire, and I'm thinking, 'This can't be happening. I'm going to the big leagues!' They got another cab to take me, but when I got to the airport, they didn't have a ticket for me. I said, 'I'm getting on that plane - I'm going to the big leagues!' So the guy put me on the plane without a ticket."

When he arrived in Miami, the news wasn't much better. Marlins manager Jim Leyland told him he was starting and hitting third in the lineup - against Curt Schilling. Nevertheless, Kotsay got a fourth-inning single for his first big league hit and hit safely in his first five games. Eventually, he was sent back to the minors after playing in only 14 games, but the Marlins still gave him a World Series "B" ring even though he was playing in the Arizona Fall League in October.

There are plenty of interesting facts and figures that have developed in Kotsay's 10-plus years in the majors and give insight into the type of player he is.

Left-handed all the way, Kotsay has a lifetime batting average of .282 against righthanders... and also a .282 career average

ANDY HAYT

against lefthanders. He made two all-rookie teams in 1998 when he hit .279 and tied Andruw Jones for the major league lead with 20 outfield assists. He has one of the most-accurate arms in the game, leading the majors in assists in 1998 and '99 and annually ranking among the leaders.

Though he's never won a Gold Glove, he's an outstanding fielder, who had a streak of 110 errorless games broken last year.

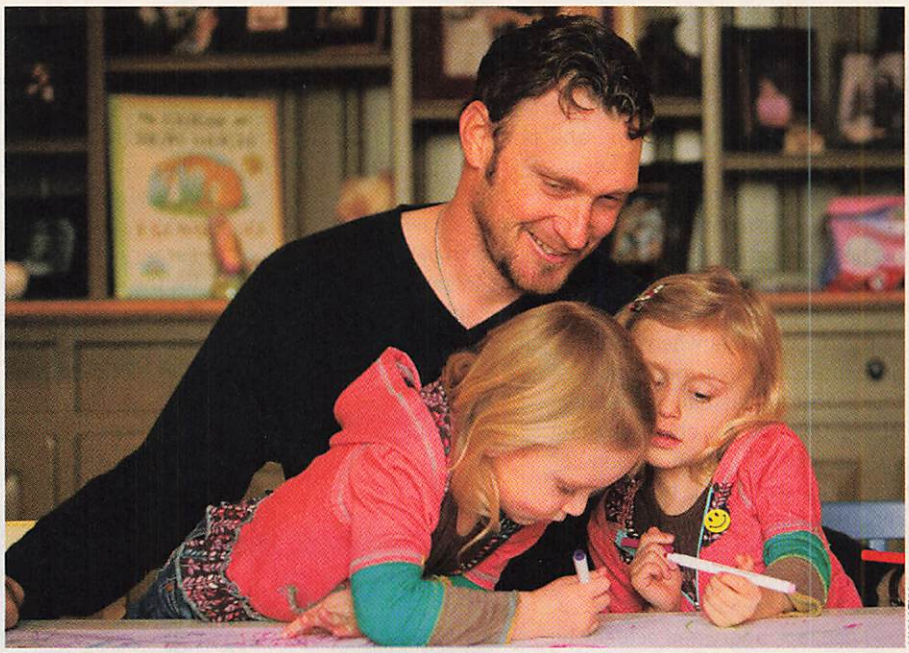
In spite of his back woes last season, he had a streak of 11 straight games without striking out (47 plate appearances), and in 2002, he went 12 games without striking out. Most years, he's among the league leaders in "toughest to strike out" - ranking third in the American League in 2005 when he went down just 51 times in 629 plate appearances (once every 12.3 PA).

Though he's been a starter basically his entire career, his lifetime batting average as a pinch-hitter is .411 (23-for-56), tops among active players.

He can play first base (28 games in the majors, the last in 2006), if needed, and was a closer - as well as an outfielder - in college. In fact, he recorded the last five outs of the championship game in the '95 College World Series.

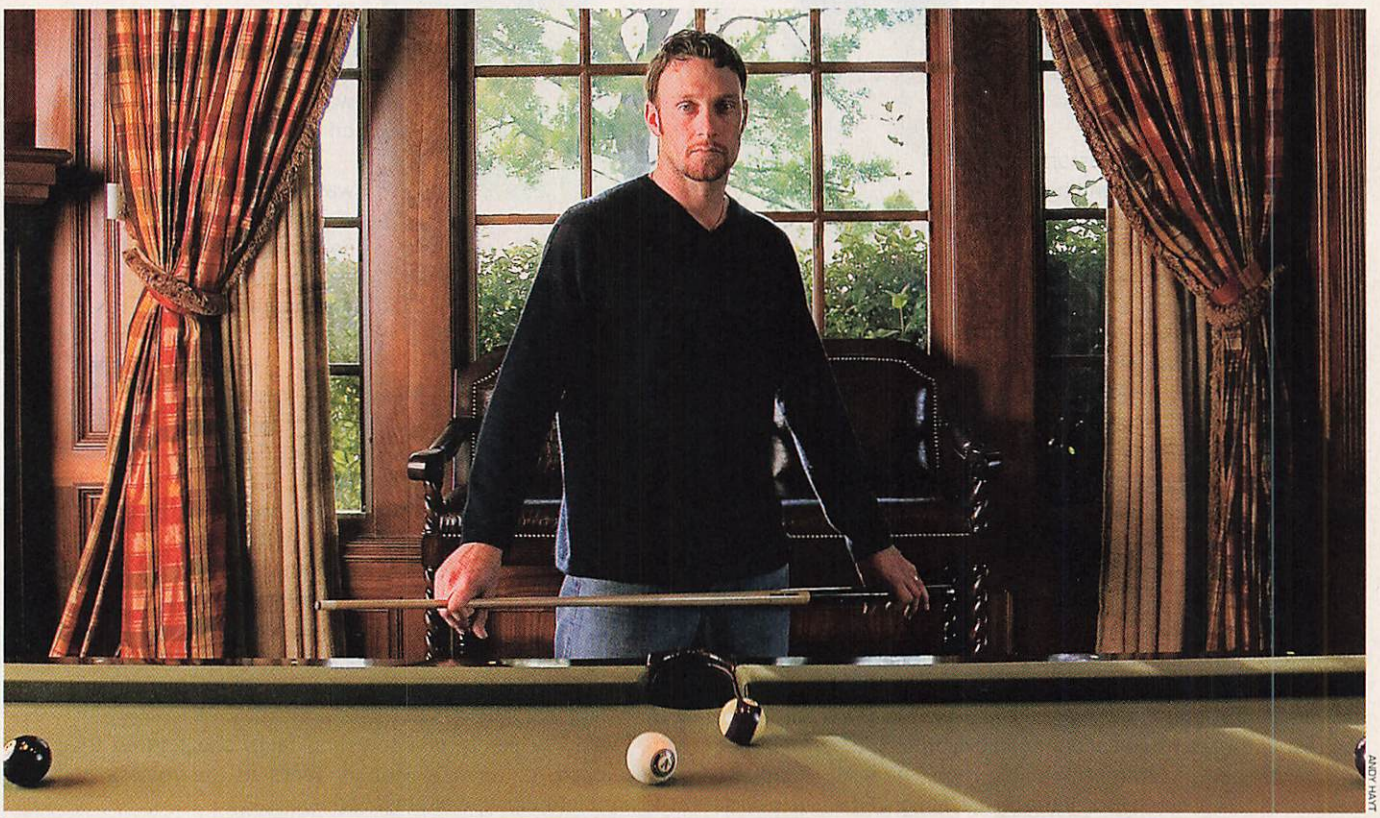
"I can hold my own at first, though groundballs get to you awfully fast there," he said. "And I'd love to pitch one inning. Pitching will always be in me."

Kotsay, 32, was raised in the Los Angeles area (Whittier), where his father, Steve, rode some pretty mean streets as a



ANDY HAYT

Kotsay is all smiles when he's playing with daughters Grace (3 1/2) and Sienna (2 1/2). Newborn son Trey (not shown) isn't quite ready to join the party yet.



ANDY HAYT

Kotsay's back left him behind the 8-ball the last two seasons, but he says he's ready to "re-prove" himself this year.

motorcycle patrolman for the LAPD. He has two older sisters, and an older brother died six days after birth. His mother, Pam, was a hairdresser. Both parents were very involved in his baseball background, and his father coached him until he reached the high school varsity as a sophomore.

"I was very disciplined (as a kid)," he said. "I was taught that nothing comes easy and to always work hard. Failure is not an option."

Kotsay's been playing baseball since age 3, and started playing tee-ball a year sooner than he was supposed to. He also played football and basketball.

"Football was my joy and first love," he said. "I just didn't get tall enough (he's listed at 6-0, 205 pounds now). I was a quarterback and free safety in high school, and Fresno State offered me a scholarship to play baseball and football."

Kotsay married Jamie in Hawaii after the 2000 season, and they have three children: daughters Grace (3 1/2) and Sienna (2 1/2) and newborn son Trey (Nov. 7).

"Family is very important to me," he said. "They're more important than my career. They do a lot for me."

Jamie is a former model who's worked in fashion capitals such as New York, Italy and Miami, appearing on magazine covers and in numerous retail campaigns (including Guess, Levis, Izod and Nordstrom).

They met at a party in Miami in 2000 when Mark was with the Marlins and Jamie was traveling between New York and Florida.

"We didn't date for a year," said Jamie, who began modeling at age 16 but "retired" so she could stay home with their children. "But once we dated, we were married within 10 months."

They originally lived in Nevada, where Jamie's parents are, but moved to San Diego last summer because they felt it was a good place to raise their family. They plan to live in Peachtree City, south of Turner Field, during the season.

"I know how this game can humble you, and I have a lot of respect for it," Kotsay said. "You go through a lot of highs and lows, and you have to stay on as even a keel as you can. But last year, I never found that high.

"I'm looking forward to having my health and playing every day. I think I can have some success. I've had a great career, and I want to play as long as I can. My goal is to play 150 games this year. This is a great opportunity to 're-prove' myself."

- Nevada-based freelance reporter Scott Oxarart contributed to this story.

MIKE GONZALEZ

SITTING OUT GAMES IS LIKE BEING IN TIME OUT

I'M THROWING AT 50 TO 60 PERCENT right now, in mid-January. The doctors and physical therapists didn't really give me a time frame as to what I'd feel like or where I'd be at this point in my rehab (from May 31 elbow surgery). They've told me I was doing pretty well.

I don't want to push it and say I'll be ready for the beginning of the year, but the way the ball is coming out (of my hand), it's looking really good. We're taking all the precautions to make sure I don't rush it.

But I'm prepared for the physical setbacks. They've told me I would have four or five setbacks at this time, and I haven't had one yet. I've had a little soreness, but it's gone the next day. I'm prepared for setbacks, but I'm not looking forward to it. I have my mind right for it.

Except for a couple of weeks around the holidays, I've been working out and rehabbing at a sports clinic in Gwinnett County (suburban Atlanta) the whole time. I've been here working with (Braves physical therapist) Lloyd Van Pamelin.

In terms of when I'll be back with the team, I wanted to break camp with the team at the end of March, but that's probably not going to happen. So, I need to listen to what the doctors tell me and follow the plan they've got for me.

I feel ready and good. They say I'm on point with the timetable that was given to me when I had the surgery.

The 2007 season was definitely the most frustrating thing I've ever experienced in my life. I can't even explain the level of frustration following the first couple of months after the surgery.

> "THEY'VE TOLD ME I WOULD HAVE FOUR OR FIVE SETBACKS AT THIS TIME, AND I HAVEN'T HAD ONE YET."

Early in the process, I talked to other guys about coming back, but now I've gone through the worst part. Sitting (out games) is like you're in "time out." You've got your nose in the corner, and you're not allowed to play! I wouldn't wish it on anybody. If you're a competitor, you want to go out and do what you do.

When the fourth and fifth months come around and you begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel and feel how the ball is coming out of your hand, you kind of relax and get into the rehab.

I think I've definitely matured through the process. I took advantage of the time off to study hitters. I'm ready to get out there and show what I can do.

I started throwing around December 20. I throw three sessions a week. Even though I'm throwing at 50-60 percent, there are times when I feel so good that I let one go! I don't do that much, but that's the thing - you're starting to feel good, and you want to see what you've got. It feels great to do that!

I keep myself positive by watching my highlight DVD that (Braves video coordinator) Rob Smith made for me. I watch myself have success. I don't watch any bad games, just the highlights!

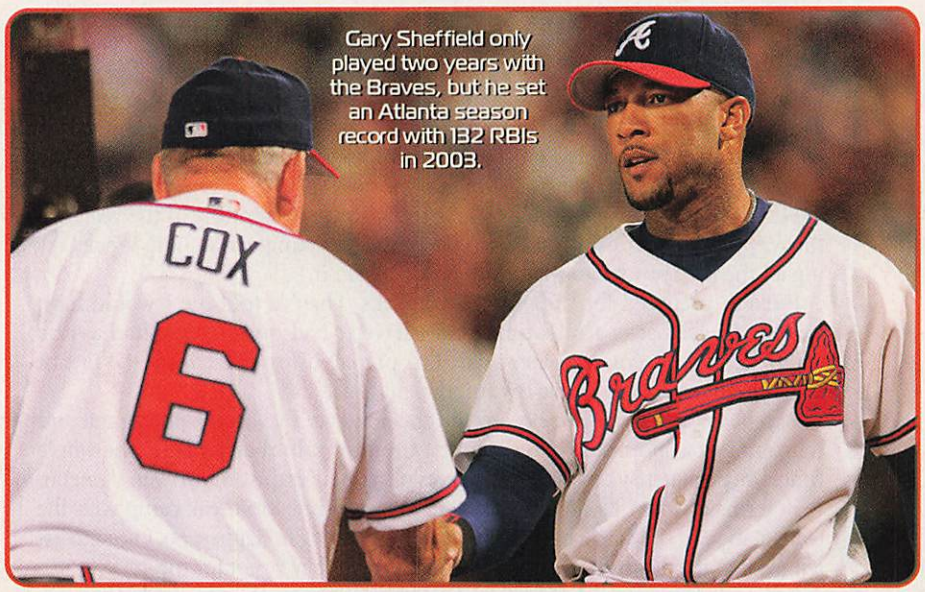
My goal for the 2008 season is to stay healthy, same as always. When I'm healthy, I know what I can do, and I put up good numbers and do well (enters season with streak of 30 straight save conversions). My approach is to get after the hitters and get the job done.

I don't think I have anything to prove to anyone but myself. I just want to go out and have a good, healthy year. I want to put up the numbers and dominate.

Getting to be on the same team with Tom Glavine is great. I grew up a Braves fan, and he was one of my favorites. I've never even met the guy!

The bullpen looks really good. Moylan and Soriano are back from last year. Yates is back. We've got the new guy, Will Ohman. I love the way he pitches. He goes right after you. I think it looks very good.

THE ART OF MANAGING ROSTER TURNOVER



Gary Sheffield only played two years with the Braves, but he set an Atlanta season record with 132 RBIs in 2003.

ATLANTA BRAVES

BY STEVE FALL

WHILE HE HAD an off-year with the bat in 2007, Andruw Jones was a star for most of his long tenure in Atlanta. The Braves face a challenge to replace his stellar defense and power, but they have a good record of compensating for losing star position players in the past.

The Braves traded Hank Aaron after the 1974 season to the Brewers. Then 40 years old, Aaron's game had slipped. After hitting 40 home runs with 96 RBIs and a .301 average in 1973, Aaron fell to 20-69-.268 in 1974. He basically served as the club's fourth outfielder that season, sharing time with Dusty Baker, Ralph Garr and Rowland Office.

Baker, Garr and Office again comprised the starting outfield in 1975. Reserve outfielders Dave May, Mike Lum and Cito Gaston picked up the playing time left by Aaron's departure. With Lum also seeing action at first base, the trio combined for 26 home runs, 91 RBIs, and a .244 batting average in 708 at-bats. Although they made up for Aaron's offense, the team struggled. Atlanta dropped from 88-74 and third place in the NL West to 67-94 and fifth place in 1975. It took the club until 1980 to post its next winning season.

As a 34-year-old in 1990, Dale Murphy was in the midst of a sub-par season. The former two-time MVP outfielder had 17 homers, 55 RBIs, and a .232 batting average when the Braves traded him to Philadelphia in August 1990.

After the deal, Bobby Cox moved David Justice from first base to right field to take Murphy's place. He used a platoon of Tommy Gregg and Francisco Cabrera at first base. Although that combo put up unimpressive numbers, the team played slightly better after the trade (25-35, .417 winning percentage) than before (40-62, .392). The deal wound up having long-term impact. Justice became a fixture in right field. Seeing the glaring need at first base, new GM John Schuerholz signed free agent Sid Bream after the season. They proceeded to go "worst-to-first" in 1991 and reached the World Series.

From 1990 through the Braves' 1995 World Championship season, Justice fueled the team's offense with power (153 HR, 494 RBIs) and a high on-base percentage (.374). After a blistering start in 1996 (6 HR, 25 RBIs, .321 BA in 140 at-bats), Justice went down with an injured shoulder on May 15 and missed the rest of the season. He never again took the field for Atlanta. The Braves traded him to Cleveland just before Opening Day 1997.

Atlanta was in second place with a 25-15 record (.625 winning percentage) when Justice got hurt in 1996. They went 71-51 (.582) the rest of the way, won the division with a 96-66 record, and reached the World Series. Rookie Jermaine Dye saw most of the playing time created by Justice's injury. He had 12 home runs, 37 RBIs, and a .281 batting average in 292 at-bats. Andruw Jones, then just 19 years old, debuted that August. After hitting .217 in 106 regular season at-bats, he emerged in the post-season with three home runs and nine RBIs.

Unlike the Murphy and Aaron situations, Justice had several good years left. He turned 31 the month after the trade – the same age Jones turns this April – and averaged 29 homers and 99 RBIs from 1997 to 2000. The rightfielders that followed Justice, primarily Michael Tucker and Brian Jordan, weren't as productive. However, the Braves still averaged 101 regular season wins in those same four years.

Gary Sheffield spent only two seasons in a Braves uniform (2002-03), but made a major impact. A monster 2003 season (39 HR, 132 RBIs, .330 BA, .419 on-base percentage, .604 slugging percentage) placed the 34-year-old outfielder third in the NL MVP balloting. When Sheffield departed after that year, Schuerholz traded for J.D. Drew to fill right field. While not as productive as Sheffield the previous year, Drew delivered outstanding numbers (31 HR, 93 RBIs, .305 BA, .436 OBP, .569 SLG). The team slipped from 101 wins in 2003 to 96 in 2004, but still won the NL East division title.

WHILE ANDRUW JONES has a significant edge in hitting stats over new centerfielder Mark Kotsay, defensive statistics reveal surprisingly little difference in fielding performance.

Range factor measures the number of plays (assists and putouts) that fielders make per nine innings. From 2001 through 2007, Kotsay's 2.62 range factor matched his league's average. During that same time frame, Jones' 2.68 range factor was .11 better than the NL average (2.57). Projecting these figures over 162 games, Jones would make 18 more plays than Kotsay. Attaching a run value to these 18 plays gets more complicated. Singles lead to approximately .5 runs on average, while doubles result in .8 runs. If Jones prevents an equal mix of singles and doubles with his extra plays, he would save about 12 runs compared to Kotsay over a full season.

Jones also made nearly two fewer errors per 162 games in this seven-year stretch. Kotsay countered by averaging three more assists per 162 games. Assuming these factors offset each other, the difference between the two defenders remains at 12 runs.

SPRING TRAINING ROSTER

MANAGER: Bobby Cox (6); **COACHES:** Chino Cadahia (52), Glenn Hubbard (17), Roger McDowell (45), Terry Pendleton (9), Eddie Perez (12), Brian Snitker (43)

40 MAN ROSTER

NO.	PITCHERS (24)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE/PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	W-L	ERA	G	GS	CG	SV	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	ML SERVICE
46	ACOSTA, MANNY	R-R	6-4	170	5/1/81 in Colon, Panama	Colon, Panama	Richmond	9-3	2.26	40	0	0	12	59.2	46	18	15	35	56	0.052
							ATLANTA	1-1	2.28	21	0	0	0	23.2	13	6	6	14	22	
30	BENNETT, JEFF	R-R	6-3	200	6/1/80 in Donelson, TN	Lebanon, TN	Mississippi	0-0	4.15	6	0	0	0	8.2	7	4	4	6	7	1.012
							Richmond	3-5	3.35	36	6	0	1	86.0	84	32	32	34	45	
							ATLANTA	2-1	3.46	3	2	0	0	13.0	14	5	5	3	14	
56	BOYER, BLAINE	R-R	6-3	215	7/11/81 in Atlanta, GA	Marietta, GA	Richmond	4-3	4.30	21	12	0	2	73.1	76	40	35	50	62	1.122
							ATLANTA	0-0	3.38	5	0	0	0	5.1	10	3	2	1	3	
38	CARLYLE, BUDDY	L-R	6-3	210	12/21/77 in Omaha, NE	Papillion, NE	Richmond	5-2	2.59	9	9	1	0	48.2	40	15	14	9	56	1.055
							ATLANTA	8-7	5.21	22	20	0	0	107.0	117	67	62	32	74	
--	CUEVAS, JAIRO	R-R	6-2	217	1/24/84 in Santo Domingo, D.R.	Santo Domingo, D.R.	Myrtle Beach	6-12	3.55	25	25	0	0	132.0	113	74	52	71	116	0.000
47	GLAVINE, TOM	L-L	6-0	209	3/25/66 in Concord, MA	Alpharetta, GA	NEW YORK (NL)	13-8	4.45	34	34	1	0	200.1	219	102	99	64	89	20.052
51	GONZALEZ, MIKE	R-L	6-2	213	5/23/78 in Robstown, TX	Deer Park, TX	ATLANTA	2-0	1.59	18	0	0	2	17.0	15	3	3	8	13	4.014
32	HAMPTON, MIKE	R-L	5-10	195	9/9/72 in Brooksville, FL	Paradise Valley, AZ	Injured - Did Not Play													14.073
15	HUDSON, TIM	R-R	6-1	170	7/14/75 in Columbus, GA	Peachtree City, GA	ATLANTA	16-10	3.33	34	34	1	0	224.1	221	87	83	53	132	8.119
36	JAMES, CHUCK	L-L	6-0	170	11/9/81 in Atlanta, GA	Mableton, GA	ATLANTA	11-10	4.24	30	30	0	0	161.1	164	77	76	58	116	2.018
49	JURRJENS, JAIR	R-R	6-1	200	1/29/86 in Willemstad, Curacao	Willemstad, Curacao	Erie	7-5	3.20	19	19	1	0	112.2	112	43	40	31	94	0.047
							DETROIT	3-1	4.70	7	7	0	0	30.2	24	16	16	11	13	
54	LEREW, ANTHONY	L-R	6-3	220	10/28/82 in Carlisle, PA	Wellsville, PA	Richmond	1-0	1.37	5	5	0	0	26.1	20	5	4	8	15	1.008
							ATLANTA	0-2	7.71	3	3	0	0	11.2	14	10	10	7	9	
--	MORTON, CHARLIE	R-R	6-4	190	10/12/83 in Flemington, NJ	Redding, CT	Mississippi	4-6	4.29	41	6	0	0	79.2	80	41	38	37	67	0.000
58	MOYLAN, PETER	R-R	6-2	200	12/2/78 in Lesmurdie, Australia	Melbourne, Australia	Richmond	0-0	0.00	2	0	0	1	2.0	0	0	0	1	3	1.061
							ATLANTA	5-3	1.80	80	0	0	1	90.0	65	27	18	31	63	
13	OHMAN, WILL	L-L	6-2	210	8/13/77 in Frankfurt, W. Germany	Mesa, AZ	CHICAGO (NL)	2-4	4.95	56	0	0	1	36.1	42	20	20	16	33	5.027
							Iowa	0-0	2.70	9	0	0	0	6.2	7	2	2	5	9	
48	RESOP, CHRIS	R-R	6-3	215	11/4/82 in Naples, FL	Naples, FL	Salt Lake	1-3	4.57	27	0	0	0	45.1	50	26	23	16	39	1.031
							LOS ANGELES (AL)	0-0	4.15	4	0	0	0	4.1	4	2	2	1	2	
37	REYES, JO-JO	L-L	6-2	230	11/20/84 in West Covina, CA	Riverside, CA	Mississippi	8-1	3.56	13	13	0	0	73.1	63	31	29	35	71	0.087
							Richmond	4-0	1.00	6	6	0	0	36.0	25	7	4	12	39	
							ATLANTA	2-2	6.22	11	10	0	0	50.2	55	39	35	30	27	
--	RIDGWAY, JEFF	R-L	6-3	210	8/17/80 in Port Angeles, WA	Summerville, SC	Durham	2-3	3.06	54	0	0	4	64.2	54	25	22	30	67	0.014
							TAMPA BAY	0-0	189.00	3	0	0	0	0.1	7	7	7	1	0	
34	RING, ROYCE	L-L	6-0	220	12/21/80 in La Mesa, CA	La Mesa, CA	Portland	4-0	1.99	27	0	0	1	31.2	22	8	7	11	44	1.002
							SAN DIEGO	1-0	3.60	15	0	0	0	15.0	11	8	6	14	17	
							Richmond	1-2	5.68	15	0	0	1	12.2	17	9	8	7	14	
							ATLANTA	0-0	0.00	11	0	0	0	5.0	2	0	0	3	4	
--	SCHREIBER, ZACH	R-R	6-1	220	6/24/82 in Cedar Rapids, IA	Cedar Rapids, IA	Mississippi	3-5	2.22	34	0	0	5	44.2	26	13	11	22	38	0.000
							Richmond	1-1	2.43	24	0	0	1	33.1	25	12	9	11	38	
29	SMOLTZ, JOHN	R-R	6-3	220	5/15/67 in Warren, MI	Duluth, GA	ATLANTA	14-8	3.11	32	32	0	0	205.2	196	78	71	47	197	19.072
39	SORIANO, RAFAEL	R-R	6-1	220	12/19/79 in San Jose, D.R.	Santo Domingo, D.R.	ATLANTA	3-3	3.00	71	0	0	9	72.0	47	26	24	15	70	5.057
--	STOCKMAN, PHIL	R-R	6-8	251	1/25/80 in Oldham, Lancashire UK	Brisbane, Australia	GCL Braves	0-0	7.20	3	0	0	0	5.0	5	4	4	1	9	0.110
							Mississippi	1-0	0.59	12	0	0	3	15.1	8	2	1	7	17	
							Richmond	1-0	1.72	9	0	0	0	15.2	7	3	3	6	15	
33	YATES, TYLER	R-R	6-4	240	8/7/77 in Lihue, HI	Koloa, HI	ATLANTA	2-3	5.18	75	0	0	2	66.0	64	44	38	31	69	3.050

NO.	CATCHERS (3)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
16	McCANN, BRIAN	L-R	6-3	230	2/20/84 in Athens, GA	Duluth, GA	ATLANTA	.333	130	442	61	147	34	0	24	93	41	54	2	1.117
							Rome	.286	2	7	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	
5	PENA, BRAYAN	S-R	5-11	210	1/7/82 in Havana, Cuba	Miami, FL	ATLANTA	.212	16	33	2	7	0	0	1	3	0	3	0	1.026
							Richmond	.301	94	345	42	104	20	2	6	48	19	38	5	
18	SAMMONS, CLINT	R-R	6-0	200	5/15/83 in Decatur, GA	Atlanta, GA	Myrtle Beach	.269	23	78	13	21	6	0	4	13	10	14	1	0.020
							Mississippi	.243	83	296	27	72	10	0	5	36	26	72	1	
							ATLANTA	.667	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	

NO.	INFIELDERS (7)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
19	ESCOBAR, YUNEL	R-R	6-2	200	11/2/82 in Havana, Cuba	Miami, FL	Richmond	.333	46	180	20	60	10	3	2	29	14	27	7	0.121
							ATLANTA	.326	94	319	54	104	25	0	5	28	27	44	5	
4	INFANTE, OMAR	R-R	6-0	180	12/26/81 in Puerto la Cruz, VZ	Guanta, VZ	DETROIT	.271	66	166	24	45	6	1	2	17	9	29	4	4.120
							Toledo	.368	10	38	3	14	2	0	0	4	4	2	0	
2	JOHNSON, KELLY	L-R	6-1	205	2/22/82 in Austin, TX	Atlanta, GA	ATLANTA	.276	147	521	91	144	26	10	16	68	79	117		2.127
10	JONES, CHIPPER	S-R	6-4	210	4/24/72 in DeLand, FL	Carrizo Springs, TX	ATLANTA	.337	134	513	108	173	42	4	29	102	82	75	5	14.024
1	PRADO, MARTIN	R-R	6-1	190	10/27/83 in Maracay, Venezuela	Maracay, Venezuela	Richmond	.316	103	395	61	125	23	3	4	41	34	41	5	0.105
							ATLANTA	.288	28	59	5	17	3	0	0	2	3	6	0	
24	TEIXEIRA, MARK	S-R	6-3	220	4/11/80 in Annapolis, MD	Westlake, TX	TEXAS	.297	78	286	48	85	24	1	13	49	45	66	0	5.000
							ATLANTA	.317	54	208	38	66	9	1	17	56	27	46	0	
20	THORMAN, SCOTT	L-R	6-3	235	1/6/82 in Cambridge, Ontario	Cambridge, Ontario	Richmond	.216	120	287	37	62	18	0	11	36	14	70	1	1.090

NO.	OUTFIELDERS (6)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
22	ANDERSON, JOSH	L-R	6-2	195	8/10/82 in Somerset, KY	Eubank, KY	Round Rock	.273	132	513	64	140	17	6	2	43	32	75	40	0.030
							HOUSTON	.358	21	67	10	24	3	0	0	11	5	6	1	
60	BLANCO, GREGOR	L-L	5-11	170	12/12/83 in Caracas, VZ	Cua, VZ	Richmond	.282	124	464	81	131	18	5	3	35	63	85	23	0.000
23	DIAZ, MATT	R-R	6-1	215	3/3/78 in Portland, OR	Lakeland, FL	ATLANTA	.338	135	358	44	121	21	0	12	45	16	63	4	1.157
7	FRANCOEUR, JEFF	R-R	6-4	220	1/8/84 in Atlanta, GA	Lilburn, GA	ATLANTA	.293	162	642	84	188	40	0	19	105	42	129	5	2.088
28	JONES, BRANDON	L-R	6-1	210	12/10/83 in Panama City, FL	Wewahitchka, FL	Mississippi	.293	94	365	58	107	21	6	15	74	44	84	12	0.015
							Richmond	.300	44	170	26	51	12	11	4	26	17	36	5	
							ATLANTA	.158	5	19	0	3	1	0	0	4	0	8	0	
11	KOTSAY, MARK	L-L	6-0	204	12/2/75 in Whittier, CA	Rancho Santa Fe, CA	Sacramento	.270	10	37	2	10	1	0	0	2	7	1	2	10.018
							OAKLAND	.214	56	206	20	44	14	0	1	20	19	20	1	

NON-ROSTER INVITEES

NO.	PITCHERS (9)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	W-L	ERA	G	GS	CG	SV	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	ML SERV
72	BUENO, FRANCISLEY	L-L	5-11	200	3/5/81 in Havana, Cuba	Santo Domingo, D.R.	Mississippi	4-6	3.67	17	14	0	0	112.2	132	55	46	26	77	0.000
							Richmond	1-0	2.79	3	3	0	0	19.1	19	6	6	3	19	
57	CAMPILLO, JORGE	R-R	6-1	225	8/10/78 in Tijuana, Mexico	Tijuana, Mexico	Tacoma	9-6	3.07	24	22	0	0	149.1	151	55	51	39	99	0.101
							SEATTLE	2-1	3.46	3	2	0	0	13.0	14	5	5	3	14	
66	DeSALVO, MATT	R-R	6-0	180	9/11/80 in New Castle, PA	New Castle, PA	Scranton-WB	9-5	2.70	20	20	0	0	113.1	92	39	34	56	102	0.050
							NEW YORK (AL)	1-3	6.18	7	6	0	0	27.2	34	20	19	18	10	
50	DRESE, RYAN	R-R	6-3	220	4/5/76 in San Francisco, CA	Oakland, CA	Did Not Play													4.087

NO.	CATCHERS (4)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
62	BOSCAN, J.C.	R-R	6-2	215	12/26/79 in Maracaibo, VZ	Maracaibo, Venezuela	Chattanooga	.286	2	7	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0.000
							Louisville	.333	130	442	61	147	34	0	24	93	41	54	2	
71	FLOWERS, TYLER	R-R	6-4	245	1/24/86 in Roswell, GA	Marietta, GA	Rome	.298	106	389	65	116	34	2	12	70	49	74	3	0.000
8	LOPEZ, JAVY	R-R	6-3	200	11/5/70 in Ponce, Puerto Rico	Alpharetta, GA	Did Not Play													13.054
27	MILLER, CORKY	R-R	6-1	225	3/18/76 in Yucaipa, CA	Yucaipa, CA	ATLANTA	.259	12	27	3	7	2	0	1	4	1	5	0	2.007
							Richmond	.210	64	181	12	38	8	0	4	25	25	26	4	

NO.	INFIELDERS (3)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
67	GUZMAN, JAVIER	R-R	6-0	170	5/4/82 in Samana, D.R.	Santo Domingo, D.R.	Altoona	.310	52	171	19	53	13	0	2	25	5	20	7	0.000
							GCL Pirates*	.095	6	21	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	
70	HERNANDEZ, DIORY	R-R	6-0	185	4/8/84 in San Pedro de Macoris, D.R.	San Pedro de Macoris, D.R.	Myrtle Beach	.313	17	64	9	20	8	2	0	9	2	11	2	0.000
							Mississippi	.307	115	433	50	133	25	1	7	59	29	68	22	
68	LILLIBRIDGE, BRENT	R-R	5-11	192	9/18/83 in Everett, WA	Bellingham, WA	Richmond	.287	87	321	47	92	14	2	10	41	20	59	28	0.000
							Mississippi	.275	52	204	31	56	8	3	3	17	20	60	14	

NO.	OUTFIELDERS (2)	B-T	HT	WT	BIRTHDATE-PLACE	RESIDENCE	2007 CLUB	AVG	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	ML SERV
26	BOECHARD, JOE	S-R	6-4	230	11/25/78 in Panorama City, CA	Charlotte, NC	Albuquerque	.355	22	76	19	27	3	0	8	28	15	12	1	2.114
							FLORIDA	.196	85	179	20	35	9	0	4	19	21	60	4	
73	SCHAFER, JORDAN	L-L	6-1	200	9/4/86 in Hammond, IN	Haines City, FL	Myrtle Beach	.294	106	436	70	128	34	8	10	43	40	95	19	0.000
							Rome	.372	30	129	16	48	15	2	5	20	16	31	4	

* Injury Rehabilitation Assignment Note: ML Service is through 2007 season

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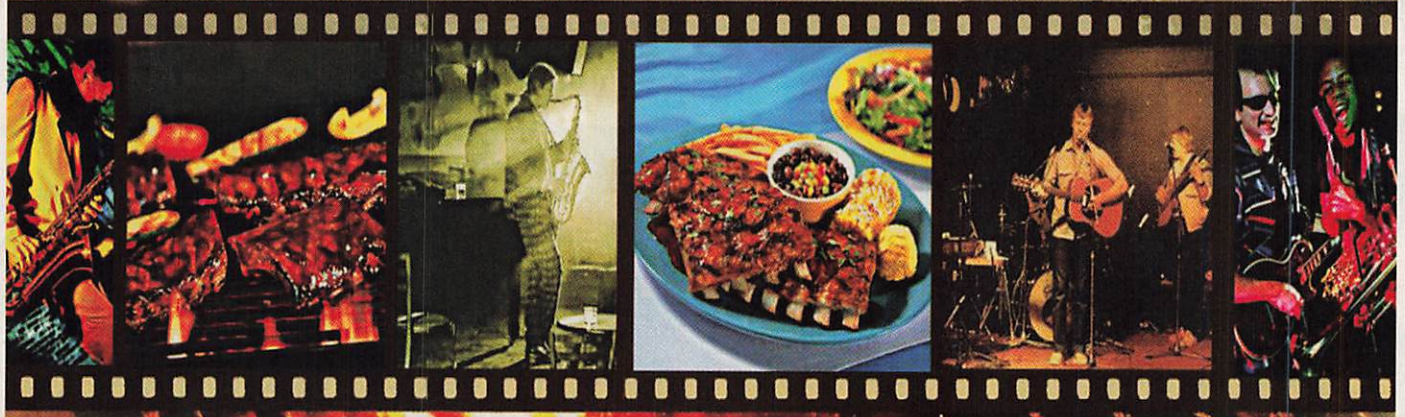

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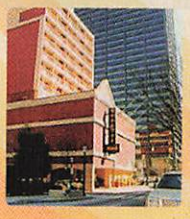

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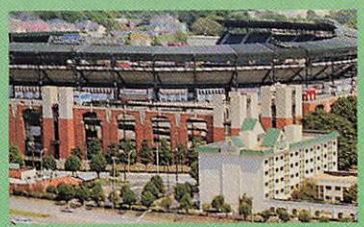

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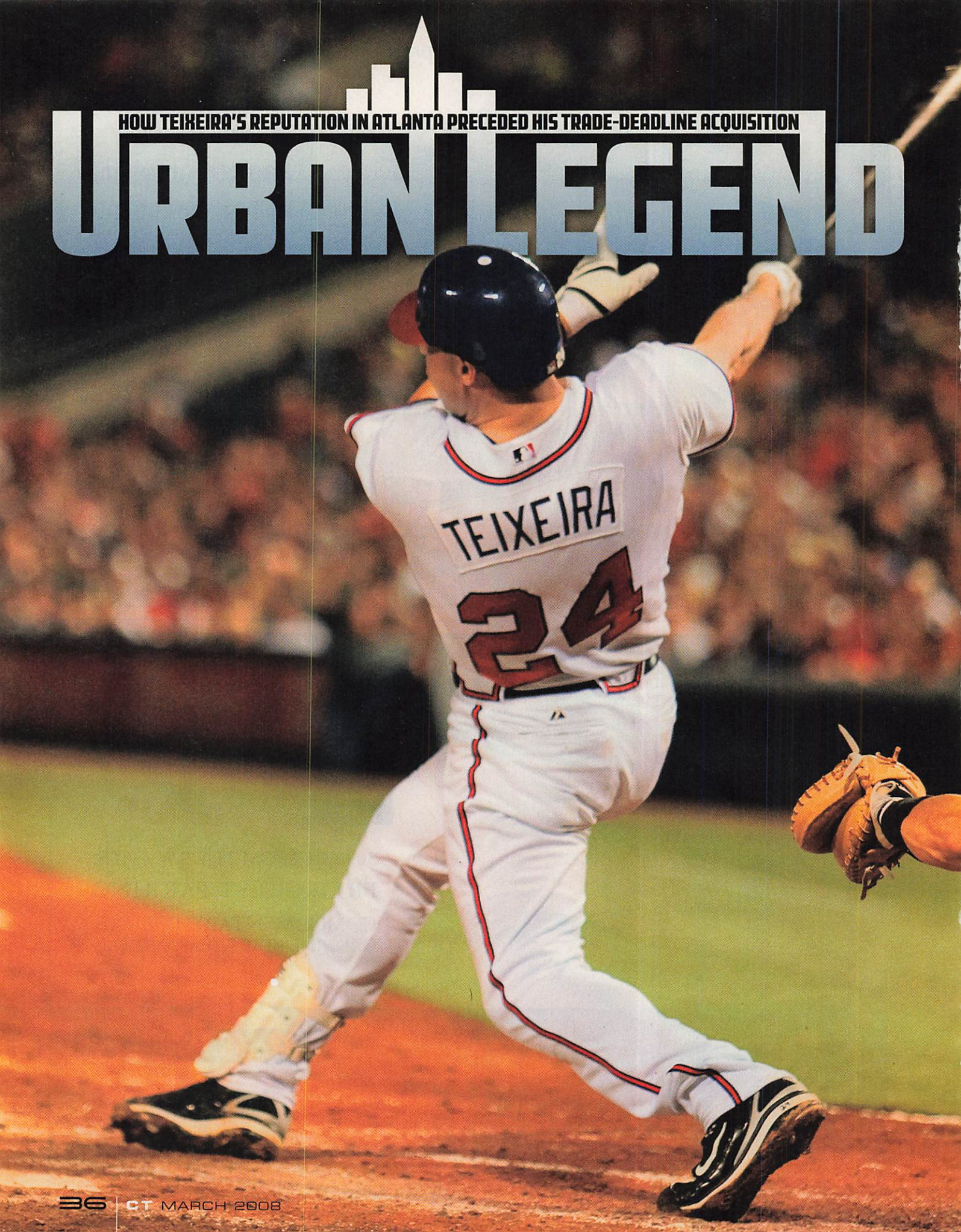
HOW TEIXEIRA'S REPUTATION IN ATLANTA PRECEDED HIS TRADE-DEADLINE ACQUISITION

URBAN LEGEND



BY JON COOPER

It's August 1, 2007 - the day after the trading deadline.

Inside the Atlanta clubhouse, there's a buzz that hasn't been felt following a mid-season trade since 1993, when the Braves acquired slugging first baseman Fred McGriff. Film crews and reporters pack the left side of the clubhouse, eagerly awaiting the appearance of another slugging first baseman, Mark Teixeira.

Even though the '07 Braves wouldn't match the magical finish of '93, the optimism felt that day upon the arrival of the 27-year-old Teixeira (turns 28 on April 11) wasn't unwarranted. It also wasn't unprecedented.

A few miles across town, Georgia Tech head coach Danny Hall knew exactly what the Braves were thinking and feeling. Eight years earlier, Hall had those exact same thoughts and feelings following Teixeira's commitment to his program.

"When I first saw him, I thought he was too good and he'd never survive the Major League Baseball Draft and end up at Georgia Tech," Hall recalled in mid-January, prior to his youth baseball clinic that featured Teixeira as guest speaker. "But he came in on a visit - I think he actually cancelled (another) visit to come to Georgia Tech - and felt it was a great fit for him. Sometimes you have to be lucky just to get a player of his caliber to school."

The Yellow Jackets were in luck, because Teixeira - then a third baseman - chose not to sign with the Boston Red Sox, who drafted him in the ninth round in 1998, opting instead for college ball in Atlanta.

"Georgia Tech was always in my mind as a great academic and baseball school," he admitted. "I cancelled a visit to Auburn - the Auburn coach wasn't real happy about it - but it was the right decision in the end."

Once arriving on the Tech campus, Teixeira, who was a three-sport star (baseball, basketball and soccer) at Mount Saint Joseph High School in Baltimore, displayed the form that made him the Maryland Player of the Year in 1997 and '98, and led to setting state high school records for career homers (29), RBIs (105) and runs (128).

His power overmatched the confines of Georgia Tech's old Russ Chandler Stadium, and awed teammates and opponents alike.

"At his first batting practice on campus, everybody knew that we had a superstar," said Georgia Tech assistant coach Bryan Prince, then a teammate of Teixeira. "I remember teams coming in during BP, and the other team would be on their top step watching him take BP.

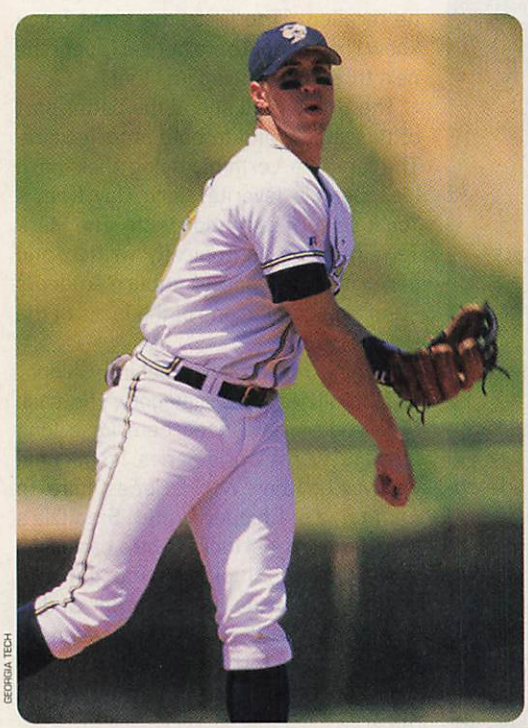
"I hit behind him, so I had to follow that up," Prince added with a laugh. "I'm just hitting line drives over shortstop and second base, and he's hitting 10, 12 balls in a row out of the ballpark.

"I spent a lot of time with him on his visit, and I could tell from Day One when he came on campus he was going to be a special player," Prince added. "Just his personality and the way he liked to compete and everything about him."

Teixeira was ACC Rookie of the Year in 1999, becoming the first freshman in 20 years to lead Tech in batting. He was named all-conference and was chosen National Freshman of the Year by Collegiate Baseball newspaper.

That was a warmup for his sophomore year in 2000, the season Teixeira looks back on most fondly.

"We had a great season (50-16, 18-6 in the ACC) and so many good things happened," he said. "We won the ACC regular season, won the ACC Tournament Championship, and were pretty close to a College World Series if it weren't for (future Cub) Mark Prior and USC (Southern California who knocked out Tech in the NCAA Super Regional)."



GEORGIA TECH

ATLANTA BRAVES

Teixeira played third base at Georgia Tech (L), but always wanted to play first base, where he's won two Gold Gloves.

ATLANTA BRAVES

"Tex" expanded on his legend, winning the Dick Howser Trophy as National Collegiate Player of the Year, hitting .427 with 18 homers and 80 RBIs.

After spending that summer playing with USA Baseball - which he led in hitting (.385), runs (26), hits (46), RBIs (23) and total bases (70) - Teixeira was deprived of his junior season, missing all but 16 games with a fractured ankle suffered early in the season.

While his college career ended on a down note - though he did hit .419, with five homers and 20 RBIs - there was no denying his body of work. He left Tech with a .409 batting average, third-highest in school history, and was only the second player in ACC history to have a career .400 batting average.

This time, the call of the draft was too strong, and the powerful, switch-hitting third baseman was going to the perfect place for someone larger than life and nicknamed "Tex." The Texas Rangers selected him with the fifth overall pick of the 2001 draft.

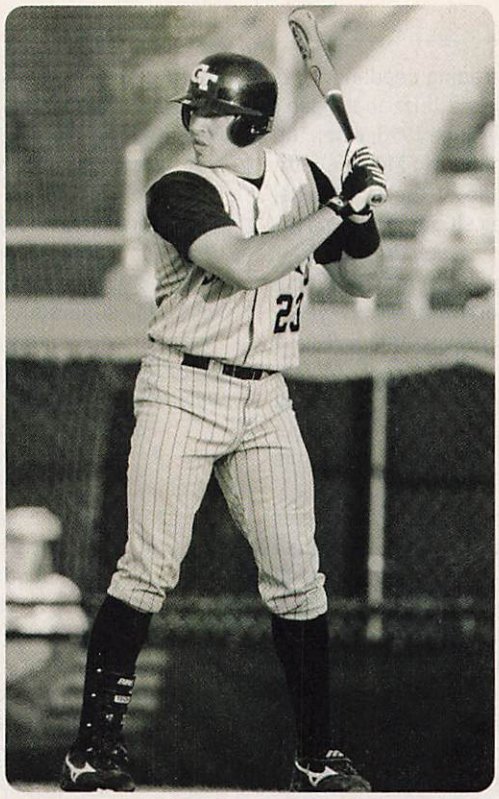
After a year in the minors, where he hit .320 at Charlotte (advanced Class A) and .316 at Tulsa (Double A), Teixeira began living his dream of playing in the majors, and did so at the position he always wanted to play - first base.

"I tell people I think I was born a first baseman," said Teixeira, whose baseball idol as a kid was Yankees first baseman Don Mattingly. "When you're growing up, the best players always go to shortstop. Then I got a little bigger and they switched me to third. But I never felt comfortable at third base.

"When I got to the big leagues, I had to play first base because Hank Blaylock was the incumbent third baseman," he continued. "I really picked it up right away. I embraced the move to first base and worked really hard at becoming a first baseman. I really love it."

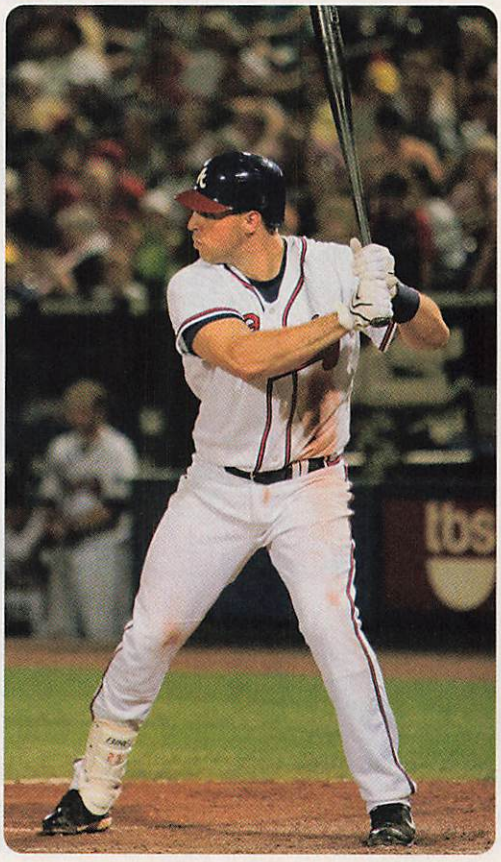
In the ensuing four and a half years, he became one of the top first basemen in the American League, earning an All-Star Game appearance (2005), two Silver Sluggers ('04 and '05) and two Gold Gloves ('04 and '05), as well as playing with future Braves teammate Chipper Jones in the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006.

But at the trading deadline last season, Teixeira found himself on his way back to Atlanta, along with reliever Ron Mahay, traded for five highly regarded prospects - catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia, shortstop Elvis Andrus, lefties Matt Harrison and Beau Jones and righty Neftali Perez. The trade came after he turned down a reported eight-year, $140 million contract extension from the Rangers.



GEORGIA TECH

Teixeira left Georgia Tech (above) with a .409 career batting average and was just as hot at the plate when he returned to Atlanta last year, driving in 56 runs in only 54 games.



ATLANTA BRAVES

Teixeira's arrival at Turner Field during the seventh inning of the July 31 game against Houston was caught on the video screen and led to a standing ovation. The next night, the standing O's kept coming, first after he drove in a run with a walk in the first inning, then following his three-run homer in the sixth. He didn't stop hitting until the Braves ran out of games.

It felt like old times for Teixeira, who hit a career-best .306 overall last season and .317 with the Braves. Part of that old-time feeling goes back to his college stomping grounds.

"One of the great things about Tech is that my whole life kind of started here," he said. "I established myself as a pretty good baseball player, but also made lifelong friends and met my wife, which was the most important decision of my life. So it all came together here."

Teixeira remembers meeting his wife, the former Georgia Leigh Williams, with whom he recently celebrated the birth of their second child, daughter Addison Leigh (their oldest, son, Jack Gordan is two) like it was yesterday.

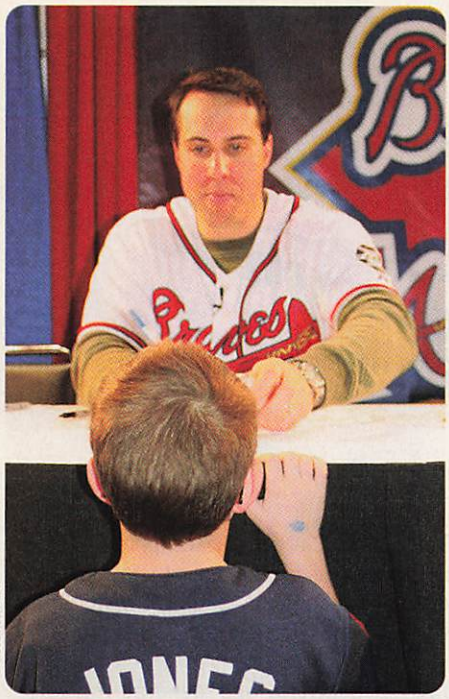
"We met my freshman year at a party," he recalled. "The first time I met her, I knew I had to hold onto her, so I spent the next three years doing just that."

The Braves will spend the better part of this year trying to hold onto Teixeira. The fans are certainly doing their part. He's been a favorite since Day One, a YouTube.com sensation with "The Mark Teixeira Song" - ironically written and performed by a pair of Auburn students - and is becoming one of the faces of the Braves.

"I think I'm probably behind Chipper and Smoltzie in that category," he said. "Those guys have been here for a long time and won a World Series. I think until we win another World Series here in Atlanta, it's Chipper's and Smoltzie's team, and I'm just lucky to be a part of it."

Jones feels lucky having Teixeira behind him in the batting order and is looking forward to a full season of teaming up to form the most devastating 3-4 switch-hitting punch in the majors.

"It's going to be big," said Jones, who finished second in the National League



CARLOS RESTREPO

A young fan scores an autograph from an obliging Teixeira at FanFest.

in batting last season and hit .333 (66-for-198) once Teixeira started hitting cleanup. "It's going to get me pitched to in some clutch situations, which is what I like. I don't like being pitched around in those eighth- and ninth-inning situations, with a base open. It's still going to happen from time to time. It's just going to take Mark bettering them a time or two before I get pitched to."

Teixeira showed what can happen when he is pitched to - hitting .317 with 17 homers and 56 RBIs in 54 games for the Braves over the final two months.

While he gives NL pitchers a refresher course this year, he'll continue to be available for Georgia Tech and Hall, his former coach.

"I love coming back and hanging out with coach Hall and Bryan (Prince), who was a good friend of mine in college and we're still good friends," he said, prior to talking at Hall's clinic. "Also, I like to help out the program any way I can. Any way I can be an ambassador to the program."

Hall says the door is always open.

"Mark is an ambassador for our program, and he sets a great example for our players or for anybody," he said. "Just to have him here, we utilize him as much as we can within the NCAA rules in recruiting and everything. He is one of the many faces of our program, but we're very proud of him."

ADDITION OF FELIZ HELPS BALANCE PHILLIES' BATS

THE PHILLIES' SIGNING of free agent third baseman **Pedro Feliz** should help restore balance to their lineup following the free agent defection of outfielder **Aaron Rowand** to the Giants. Leftfielder **Pat Burrell** is the only returning member of the club who hit more than nine home runs from the right side last season.

The 2013 Hall of Fame ballot could be a doozy, featuring not only **Craig Biggio**, but also **Barry Bonds**, **Roger Clemens**, **Mike Piazza** and **Sammy Sosa**. Biggio retired after last season, and the other four were without contracts as spring training camps opened. Sosa, coming off a 21-homer, 92-RBI season with the Rangers, was looking for significant dollars and a guarantee of 450 plate appearances. Former Brave **Reggie Sanders** and **Shawn Green** were two other players on the verge of retirement.

The terms of the **Johan Santana** contract were more favorable to the Mets than originally reported. Santana signed a six-year, $137.5 million contract, not a six-year extension on top of the one year remaining on his previous deal. Also, the present-day value of the deal is $123.1 million. The Mets will defer $5 million per season.

The Cardinals, buoyed by the progress of lefthander **Mark Mulder** in his recovery from rotator cuff surgery, backed off their pursuit of another starting pitcher. Mulder, who underwent arthroscopic surgery on Sept. 24, could return by early May. Righthander **Chris Carpenter** could be back by the All-Star break.

The Red Sox can withstand the absence of injured **Curt Schilling**, but their depth after **Clay Buchholz**, their new No. 5 starter, isn't great. **Kyle Snyder** and **Julian Tavarez** can fill in, and **Devern Hansack** and **David Pauley** represent less experienced options. But **Justin Masterson**, the Sox's best pitching prospect after Buchholz, currently projects as more of a **Jeff Nelson**-type reliever than a No. 3 starter. He needs to develop his secondary pitches.

After getting 10 players for shortstop **Miguel Tejada** and lefthander **Erik Bedard**, the next test for Orioles president **Andy MacPhail** was whether owner **Peter Angelos** would allow him to trade second baseman **Brian Roberts**. Angelos delayed the Bedard trade and long has been enamored with Roberts, who was drawing heavy interest from the Cubs.

Speaking of the Cubs, don't be surprised if they move former Braves righthander **Jason Marquis**, possibly in a deal for Roberts. Marquis' three-year, $21 million contract is back-loaded – he's earning $6.375 million this season and $9.875 million in 2009. Any team willing to take on that money likely would demand decent prospects from the Cubs, as well.

Why were the Reds so hot after A's righthander **Joe Blanton**? In his first three seasons, Blanton was 42-34 with a 4.09 ERA and an average of 209 innings pitched – numbers that compare favorably with **John Lackey**'s first three seasons with the Angels. One concern with Blanton is that he pitched much better at the Oakland Coliseum than he did on the road.

- KEN ROSENTHAL IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR FOXSPORTS.COM

Moving TO THE 'Burbs

TOP FARM TEAM RELOCATING FROM RICHMOND TO GWINNETT COUNTY IN 2009

BY MARK BOWMAN OF MLB.COM

MIKE PLANT, Braves executive vice-president of business operations, spent the past four years attempting to find a suitable facility for the club's Triple-A affiliate.

After countless battles with the city of Richmond, Va., and an untold amount of hours evaluating other potential locations throughout the United States, he came to the realization that the best solution was in his organization's backyard.

Gwinnett County isn't exactly next door to Turner Field. But it is just about 30 minutes away, and in the eyes of the Braves, this proximity won't prove to be a detriment as much as it will be a positive when they move their Triple-A team there from Richmond for the start of the 2009 season.

"It's going to be really successful," Plant said Jan. 15, after the Gwinnett County Commissioners unanimously approved the construction of a $40 million stadium that will be ready for the Braves next season. It will be located 36 miles northeast of Turner Field, about one mile off I-85 at 2500 Buford Dr. in Lawrenceville.

After coming to the realization that Richmond was not going to provide the funds to make the necessary stadium upgrades, Plant and other members of the Braves management team began evaluating the positives and negatives of moving the club to Gwinnett County, which was planning to build a stadium to serve as home to an independent team.

While working with Bert Nasuti and other Gwinnett County Commissioners, the Braves came to the conclusion that it would be best to reap the financial advantages this new stadium will provide, while taking the gamble that having another professional team this close to Turner Field could prove to be a good thing.

The Braves aren't going into uncharted waters with this decision. The Red Sox (Pawtucket) and Mariners (Tacoma) both have Triple-A affiliates that are located approximately the same distance from their major league stadiums as the Gwinnett County team will be from Turner Field.

The proposed 7,000-seat stadium, which also will provide room for an additional 3,000 fans on the outfield berm, will be constructed in the northern portion of Gwinnett County, near the Mall of Georgia.

While Gwinnett County will own the stadium, the Braves will manage the daily operations. Like the grand minor league parks that they've constructed in Rome, Ga., and Pearl, Miss., over the course of the past five years, they want this park to stand as a blueprint for the others that follow in the minors.

Since moving their Double-A affiliate to Mississippi before the start of the 2005 season, the Braves have been reluctant to send many of their top prospects to Richmond, where they would be subjected to poor field conditions and few amenities, such as indoor batting cages.

Braves president John Schuerholz and general manager Frank Wren both believe they'll now be more willing to send more of their better prospects to the Triple-A level. The players will have the benefit of playing in a great facility and have the opportunity to generate an interest that could lead to fans following them to Turner Field.

The proximity does provide plenty of potential positives. Players that need to go on rehab assignments can stay close to home and play against better competition than they have in the past, when many chose to make the hour-long drive to the Class-A affiliate in Rome.

Also, in the event the Braves need to make a late-afternoon transaction on the day of a game, they won't have to wonder if a promoted player is going to make his flight out of Mississippi or Richmond. They'll just have to hope he can beat the Atlanta traffic to get to Turner Field on time.

Richmond has been home for the Braves' Triple-A affiliate since 1966, and in 1985, when they opened The Diamond, the city possessed one of the country's best minor league stadiums. But, the stadium has become outdated and a cause for concern for most of this decade.

A combination of extended heavy rains and a bad drainage system forced the Richmond Braves to play each of the 2004 playoff games on the road.

"There just was never any clarity that the financial structure was going to work in Richmond," Plant said. "That left me with a lot of concern. I knew what we were willing to put on the table, and nobody else made any commitments."

Gwinnett County's commitment began with Nasuti's vision to bring minor league baseball to his constituents. A recent study showed the county as the most suitable area in the country for a minor league baseball team. It's already shown great support for its teams in the East Coast Hockey League and the Arena Football League.

A website has been established at gwinnettbraves.com where fans can place a $100 deposit on season tickets, as well as buy caps and inquire about employment.

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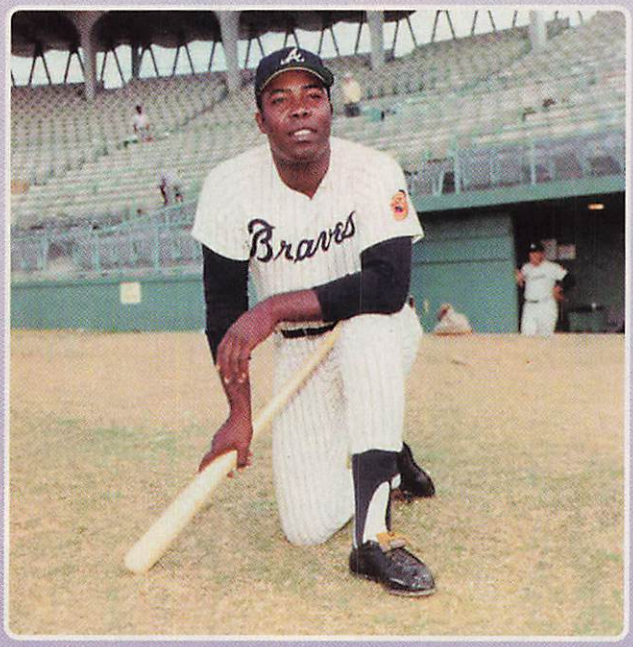
BY BILL BALLEW

GARR, TOMMIE AARON HONORED BY INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE HALL



ATLANTA BRAVES

Tommie Aaron, younger brother of Hank, is the only man in International League history to be MVP (1967) and win the championship as manager (1978).

FORMER RICHMOND BRAVES standouts Ralph Garr and Tommie Aaron are among 27 individuals scheduled to be inducted into the International League Hall of Fame this summer when the Triple-A league observes its 125th season.

Aaron, the younger brother of Hank Aaron, is the only man to be name the IL Most Valuable Player and win the league title as a manager. He served as an infielder for the R-Braves for four seasons (1966-67, '71-72) and was chosen the league's top performer in 1967 when he posted a .309 batting average for the pennant winners. In 1977, he became the first African American to manage in the IL, and in 1978 he guided Richmond to its first Governors' Cup championship. Aaron, who died in 1984 at age 45, had his uniform number (23) retired by the club, and the R-Braves' MVP award is named in his honor.

Garr is one of only five players in IL annals to win back-to-back batting crowns. The outfielder accomplished the feat in 1969 and 1970, with his .386 average during the latter season representing the league's highest average since 1938. Garr led the IL in stolen bases during his two seasons with the R-Braves, and his 63 steals in 1969 represents the third-highest total in team history. Known as "Road Runner" during his 13-year career in the major leagues, Garr is also a member of the Braves Hall of Fame and has worked as a scout with Atlanta for most of the past two decades.

PENA EXCELS IN CARIBBEAN

ONE OF THE TWO Dominican Republic teams competing in the Caribbean Series won the four-team, six-day event with a 5-1 record that concluded on Feb. 7. Three players with connections to the Braves competed in the series. Brayan Pena served as the primary catcher for the Dominican squad that finished 3-3, while outfielder Reggie Taylor and catcher Iker Franco played for the club representing Mexico.

Pena, who is competing for the reserve catching job with Atlanta during spring training, had an excellent showing throughout the winter. In the Dominican Winter League playoffs, he batted .317 with four RBIs and eight runs scored in 16 games for the Gigantes. He continued to produce in the Caribbean Series by hitting .261 (6-for-23) with a home run, three extra-base hits and two RBIs.

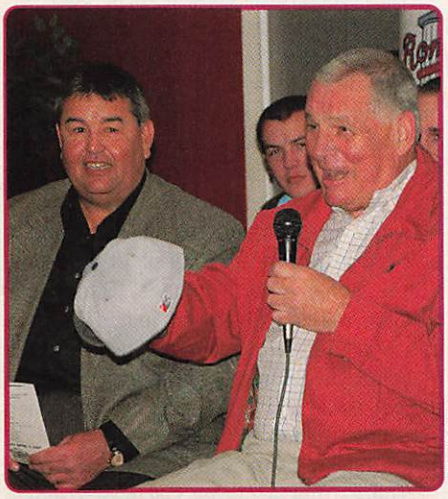
SPECIAL

The Jan. 5 wedding in Winter Park, Fla., of minor league lefthander JonathanVenters and his wife, Viviona, (front) was a Braves-fest that also included(Back, L-R) righthander Michael Broadway, scout George Martin, andrighthanders James Parr and Charlie Morton.

Taylor, who signed with the Braves this winter as a six-year minor league free agent, tied for first in the Mexican Pacific League playoffs with five home runs and seven extra-base hits. The outfielder also placed second with a .540 slugging percentage and tied for fourth with nine runs scored. Taylor struggled in the Caribbean Series, however, going 2-for-24 in six games.

Franco, a member of the 2007 Richmond Braves, caught four games for Mexico in the Caribbean Series and had one hit in 10 at-bats.

One other note centers on the efforts of second baseman Martin Prado, who is battling for a utility role with Atlanta during spring training. Prado ranked fourth among all players by driving in 13 runs for Aragua in the Venezuelan Winter League playoffs.



ROME BRAVES

Bobby Cox and Chino Cadahia (L) were among the guests who helped build enthusiasm for the season in Rome.

ROME HEATS UP

THE ROME BRAVES hosted their sixth annual Hot Stove Gathering on Jan. 31 at State Mutual Stadium. Frank Wren, Bobby Cox, bench coach Chino Cadahia and third base coach Brian Snitker were among those in attendance signing autographs.

The 2008 Rome field staff, including manager Randy Ingle, hitting coach Bobby Moore and pitching coach Jim Czajkowski, greeted the fans, along with 2007 players Phillip Britton, Tyler Flowers and Jon Mark Owings.

All proceeds from the event benefited Cancer Navigators in memory of Jim Beauchamp, the Braves' minor league field operations supervisor who died in December.

Legends OF THE MINORS

ADRIAN "SMOKEY" GARRETT

EDITOR'S NOTE

Probably since the formation of the National League in 1876, baseball's best minds have been baffled by players who excel - often to extraordinary levels - in the minor leagues but never get over the hump in the majors. The Braves have had their share of these players that ChopTalk will profile monthly in this new feature.

IN 19 SEASONS of getting paid to play baseball, Adrian "Smokey" Garrett hit 393 home runs - an average of nearly 21 per year. Yet only 11 of those came during parts of eight seasons in the major leagues (276 at-bats) when he just once batted more than 54 times in a year.

Why didn't the lanky slugger get to play more at the game's top level?

"There just wasn't much of an opportunity for a guy like me in the 1960s," said Garrett, who signed with the Braves in 1961 and played nine years in the organization.

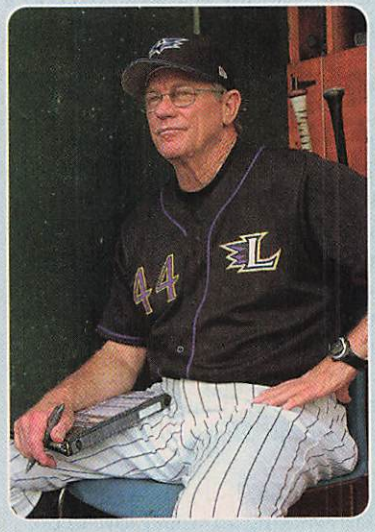
"The Braves had a veteran team with guys like Eddie Mathews, Hank Aaron, Rico Carty, Felipe Alou, Warren Spahn. I used to say I was Hank's caddy, because he would play the first few innings of the spring games and I'd finish up. Those were great times being around those players, but the chances to play were limited."

Signed by scout Zack Taylor out of high school in Sarasota, Fla., Garrett began displaying power in his second professional season, at Cedar Rapids in 1962, by hitting 19 home runs. In 1965, he hit 20 homers in Atlanta - but it was for the minor league Atlanta Crackers.

"We played in Atlanta Stadium, which was a brand new stadium, one year before the Braves arrived from Milwaukee," Garrett said. "It was a great experience and a great ballpark, and I hoped it might help me for the next season."

Initially, that appeared to be the case. Garrett made Atlanta's Opening Day roster in 1966, yet was sent to Richmond a month into the season after getting only four at-bats. He never returned to the major leagues with the Braves despite hitting 32 home runs between Richmond and Austin in 1967 and leading the Texas League at Shreveport with 24 homers in 1969.

Garrett proceeded to lead his league in home runs three more times, including a career-best 43 at Tacoma in the Pacific Coast League in 1971. He had brief major league stints with the Cubs (1970, '74-75), A's (1971-72) and Angels (1975-76) before spending his last three years as a player in Japan with Hiroshima, where he hit 97 home runs from 1977-79.



Garrett remained in baseball after retiring his bat. He has managed or coached in the minor leagues for the past 25 years, and 2008 will be his sixth straight season as the hitting coach for the Triple-A Louisville Bats (L).

"I take pride in my entire career," said the 65-year-old Garrett. "I'm disappointed I didn't spend more of it in the major leagues, but I think I did pretty good everywhere I got to play."

LAST YEAR I FOUND LESS CAN BE MORE

EDITOR'S NOTE

Phillip Britton is a 23-year-old catcher who spent most of the 2007 season at Class-A Rome, where he hit .287 with 10 home runs and 44 RBIs in 345 at-bats. In 2006 at Danville (advanced rookie), he batted .296, second-best among all rookie-level catchers and seventh among all Braves farmhands.

EVERY YEAR around January 1, my body flips a switch and starts counting down to spring training. No matter how long the season may feel on occasion, I'm ready to get going again after having a chance to catch my breath during the winter.

Last year at Rome, the entire team had a slow start, but the coaching staff made sure things were accomplished. For example, when (pitching coach) Doug Henry was with us early in the season, he worked with me on calling pitches and working with pitchers. He showed me things to look for and pick up during games.

(Coach) Bobby Moore was always working with me on my hitting and my approach. And as far as Randy Ingle goes, there aren't many skippers any better. The entire experience helped me become a better player.

This year, there's a good chance I could be at Myrtle Beach, and I'm looking forward to playing for Rocket Wheeler. I've been around him the last couple of years in spring training, and I understand how he goes about running a team. I like Rocket's style. And to have the chance to work with a pitching coach like Bruce Dal Canton, it doesn't get any better.

> "I MUST GET A LITTLE BIT BETTER ABOUT TAKING PITCHES AND WORKING THE COUNT IN MY FAVOR."

I was somewhere between pleased and okay with the way I hit last season. I know I have to walk more (only nine), and while I didn't strike out much (44), I probably led the South Atlantic League in rollovers. I must get a little bit better about taking pitches and working the count in my favor in order to be a better hitter.

One thing I learned last season is how I need to be more productive with my work habits. I was getting a lot of work in before games, taking a ton of swings, until Bobby Moore and (roving hitting instructor) Jack Maloof suggested I cut back on some of that.

I've never had anybody tell me not to work as much, but I gave it a shot. I was hitting around .240 at the time, and before I knew it, I started hitting better. Before, by the sixth inning, I was dragging and my at-bats suffered as a result. I found that by being a little fresher, I was more productive throughout the games.

I also worked well with (roving catching instructor) Joe Breeden. Joe really likes to get after it, and that's the kind of guy I like. He really pushes you, and he doesn't sugar-coat things, particularly things you need to work on. He helped me with my throws to second on stolen bases. I think I did a decent job of throwing guys out, but like Joe always reminds me, that's an area that can always improve.

Having gone to Hawaii to play this past fall, it seems the season is coming sooner, which is good. I enjoyed myself in Hawaii, but I didn't see much playing time. The best part was getting a chance to catch pitchers I didn't know. I busted my butt catching by doing drills every day, and that made the experience very productive for me, even if I didn't hit very well.

Because of a wrist injury, I missed a lot of work over the winter prior to last season and went into spring training a little rusty. I've been pounding on my catching this winter, working on blocking balls, my setup, catching balls that run in on the hands.

Now I've got that itch to play some baseball again. I can't wait to get back where the weather is a little warmer and start working on what I love to do.

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

GOLD GLOVE GOAL

IN LESS THAN A YEAR, Jordan Schafer has gone from being a relative unknown in the lower reaches of the Braves' farm system to a top-rated prospect many observers believe will emerge as the long-term answer to Atlanta's needs in center field. While the rapid rise in fame would overwhelm most 21-year-olds, Schafer seems largely unaffected with the increased expectations.

Schafer picked up the Hank Aaron Award as the top player in the farm system during the Braves 400 Club's annual winter banquet Feb. 2 in Atlanta. He attracted as much attention from the guests as anyone in attendance, yet downplayed speculation that he's close to major league ready.

"He's very level-headed about it," said Kurt Kemp, Atlanta's director of player development. "He has a quiet confidence and isn't a guy who talks a whole lot. He lets his play do his talking for him. He's very confident in his abilities, but he knows he still has work to do to get to where he wants to go. He has a very good perspective on things."

Scouts have compared Schafer's defensive prowess in center with that of 10-time Gold Glove winner Andruw Jones. Offensively, Schafer, who led the minors in hits last season with 176, has shown similarities to the Mets' Carlos Beltran with the ability to drive the ball while still possessing enough speed to hit near the top of the lineup. Such associations, however, mean little to Schafer.

"There's not a player I've ever tried to model myself after," Schafer said. "I just try to play the game to the best of my ability, based on my strengths. I have goals, such as winning the Gold Glove one day in the big leagues. But otherwise I just try to do everything I can to be better and be as complete a player as possible."

Frank Wren took some of the immediate focus off Schafer in January by acquiring veteran outfielder Mark Kotsay. Schafer, meanwhile, is expected to open the 2008 season at Double-A Mississippi to work on such things as reducing his strikeouts and getting better reads on pitchers in order to improve his stolen base percentage.

"I need to be consistent, that's the big thing for me," Schafer said. "Some days I am really on and know exactly what I need to do to have success, and then there are other days when I feel kind of lost. But I'm working hard on every aspect of my game. I love coming to the park every day and working to become better at my job."

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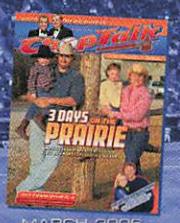

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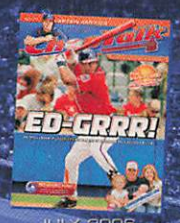

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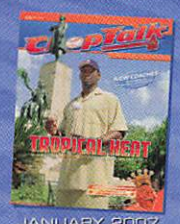

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Marquis Grissom (L), who was named "Mr. Baseball," chats with Phil Niekro Award winner Jo-Jo Reyes (R) and Hank Aaron Award winner Jordan Schafer.

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

BANQUET SALUTES END OF TBS ERA; GRISSOM NAMED "MR. BASEBALL"

BY JON COOPER PHOTOS BY CARLOS RESTREPO

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE received top billing at the Braves 400 Club's 42nd annual Eddie Glennon Gameboree Feb. 2 at the Marriott Century Center. But in the end, it was the community work presently being done by former centerfielder Marquis Grissom that landed him the biggest honor of the evening - the 400 Club's "Mr. Baseball" award.

Much of the evening was spent with the likes of Braves Hall of Famers Phil Niekro, Skip Caray and emcee Pete Van Wieren reminiscing about the era of the Braves on TBS that began in 1976 and ended last year. The enthusiastic crowd of 300-plus also saw Jordan Schafer, regarded as the team's centerfielder of the future, receive the Hank Aaron Award as the most outstanding player in the farm system, and promising lefthander Jo-Jo Reyes receive the Phil Niekro Award as the most outstanding pitcher in the system.

Grissom created the Marquis Grissom Baseball Association (June and Dec. '07 CT) that has tackled such projects as restoring baseball fields, establishing youth leagues, and helping under-privileged kids get on a level playing field.

"I understood how important the community was for me," said Grissom, an Atlanta native. "My goal in the MGBA is to teach discipline number one, sportsmanship number two, and leadership skills. I thought it was a great idea to come back and serve the community and try to bring the community together. The success we had last year was great. We're looking for bigger and better things this year."

But it was the stories of how TBS spread Braves baseball to the far corners of the nation that dominated the program.

"The story of TBS had little to do with Atlanta," said Van Wieren. "The TBS story was really about people that lived in places like Stormlake, Iowa; Lake Charles, Louisiana; Kalispell, Montana; Valdez, Alaska; Hilo, Hawaii. It started out as a local team being televised on cable television.

"Let me dispel one rumor: Ted Turner did not put us on national television because of the star quality of its three broadcasters. Matinee idols we were not," he added, referring to the trio he helped form with Skip Caray and Ernie Johnson.

A picture of the threesome from back in the day graced the cover of the evening's program.

"What started out simply as a local team on a national cable station very soon took on a life that none of us anticipated," he added.

Van Wieren talked about meeting the city manager of Hilo, Hawaii, who expressed gratitude for TBS bringing baseball to Hawaii. "The Professor" also talked about a bar in Valdez, Alaska, named "The Braves Bar" that broadcast the games on TBS and kept chalkboard updates for oil pipeline workers who would come in after their shifts.

"Throughout the years, the Braves have been bad, they've been really bad," said Niekro of the long drought that preceded the 14

straight division titles. "But throughout all those years, you've stood tall with us. Thank you for being with us."

Van Wieren told a story of how the Braves' popularity sustained even when the team was playing poorly.

"The Atlanta Journal-Constitution decided to run an article that nobody was watching the Braves anymore," Van Wieren recalled. "They interviewed about six people, 'Do you even watch the Braves on television?' Not anymore. All six people said.

"Skip did not believe that, so on the air, he invited anyone who was watching to call the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and he gave the phone number," Van Wieren continued to big laughs. "It took the Atlanta Journal-Constitution approximately a day and a half to get their phone system back in order."

Such stories typified the night. Niekro talked about being able to count the crowd from the bullpen and "only miss by seven or eight people," and former third baseman Bob Horner related a tale about a documentary done at his house, when his sons told the interviewer that their favorite baseball player was Dale Murphy.

There also were touching moments.

When Richmond Braves manager Dave Brundage accepted his award for Minor League Manager of the Year, he dedicated it to Jim Beauchamp and Mel Roberts, two recently departed members of the Braves family.

Chip Caray talked about his special Father's Day broadcast of 2005 in Cincinnati with Skip: "The first time in 35 years that I got to spend Father's Day with my dad."

Former Braves reliever, and for one memorable July 4 (1985) - actually early-morning July 5 - home run hitter Rick Camp expressed his gratitude to the 400 Club.

Camp, who was recently released from prison after serving a 23-month sentence for conspiring to commit fraud, thanked the group "for helping me start over again."

Van Wieren had the last word of the evening.

"It's not the Braves station any more, but that doesn't mean we're going anywhere," he said. "All of the games are going to be on television somewhere this year. You'll have to check your local listings a little more often than you used to. Some of the games will be on FSN South, some of the games will be on SportSouth, some of the games will be on Peachtree TV, some of the games will be on FOX, some of the games will be on ESPN, some of the games will be on the TBS Game of the Week, so check your local listings.

"Or, tune in to Braves radio," Van Wieren added slyly, referring to where he and Skip Caray will work most games.

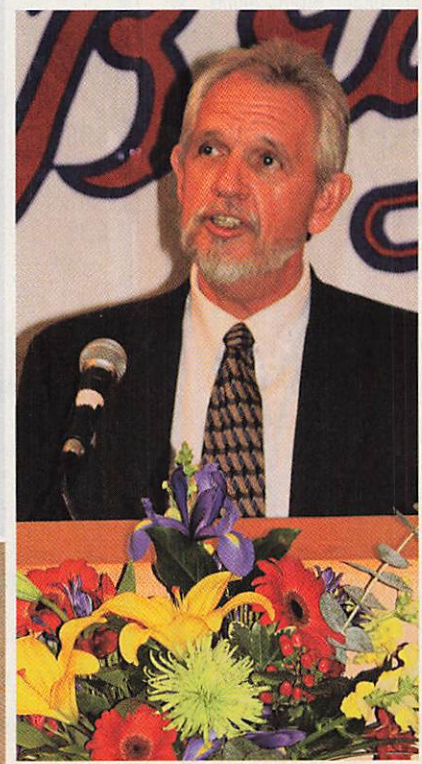
Other award winners included:

* "Red Wooten" High School player of the Year to Dunwoody High pitcher/outfielder Chris Epps, who will attend Clemson.

* Jason Varitek Award, given to the outstanding scholar/athlete in Georgia to University of Georgia outfielder Jonathan Wyatt.

* Bill Lucas Award for sportsmanship and character to Richmond infielder Wes Timmons.

* Luke Appling Nostalgia Award to former Pittsburgh and Cincinnati outfielder Jerry Lynch, one of the premier pinch-hitters in history.



Bob Horner (L) and 400 Club president Wayne Coleman laugh at a story from Phil Niekro (R), and Rick Camp (top inset) thanks the fans for welcoming him back.

TICKETING

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MUSEUM & TOUR INFO

The Ivan Allen Jr. Braves Museum features more than 500 Braves artifacts that trace the team's history from its beginnings in Boston (1871-1952) to Milwaukee (1953-65) to Atlanta (1966-present). It is located on the northwest side of Turner Field at aisle 134. The museum opens two and a half hours before each game and closes in the middle of the seventh inning. The museum is open year-round and is the starting point of one-hour guided tours of Turner Field. Tours leave on the hour.

Tour reservations are not necessary for individuals or groups of less than 20 people. Tickets can be purchased the day of the tour at the main ticket window. Free parking in the Green lot.

Admission to the museum during games is one token ($2) and $5 on non-game days. Tour tickets are $12 for adults, $7 for children and $10 for groups of 20 or more. Walk-up tickets can be purchased at the ticket window. Groups of 20 or more and school groups must make reservations two weeks in advance by calling (404) 614-2311.

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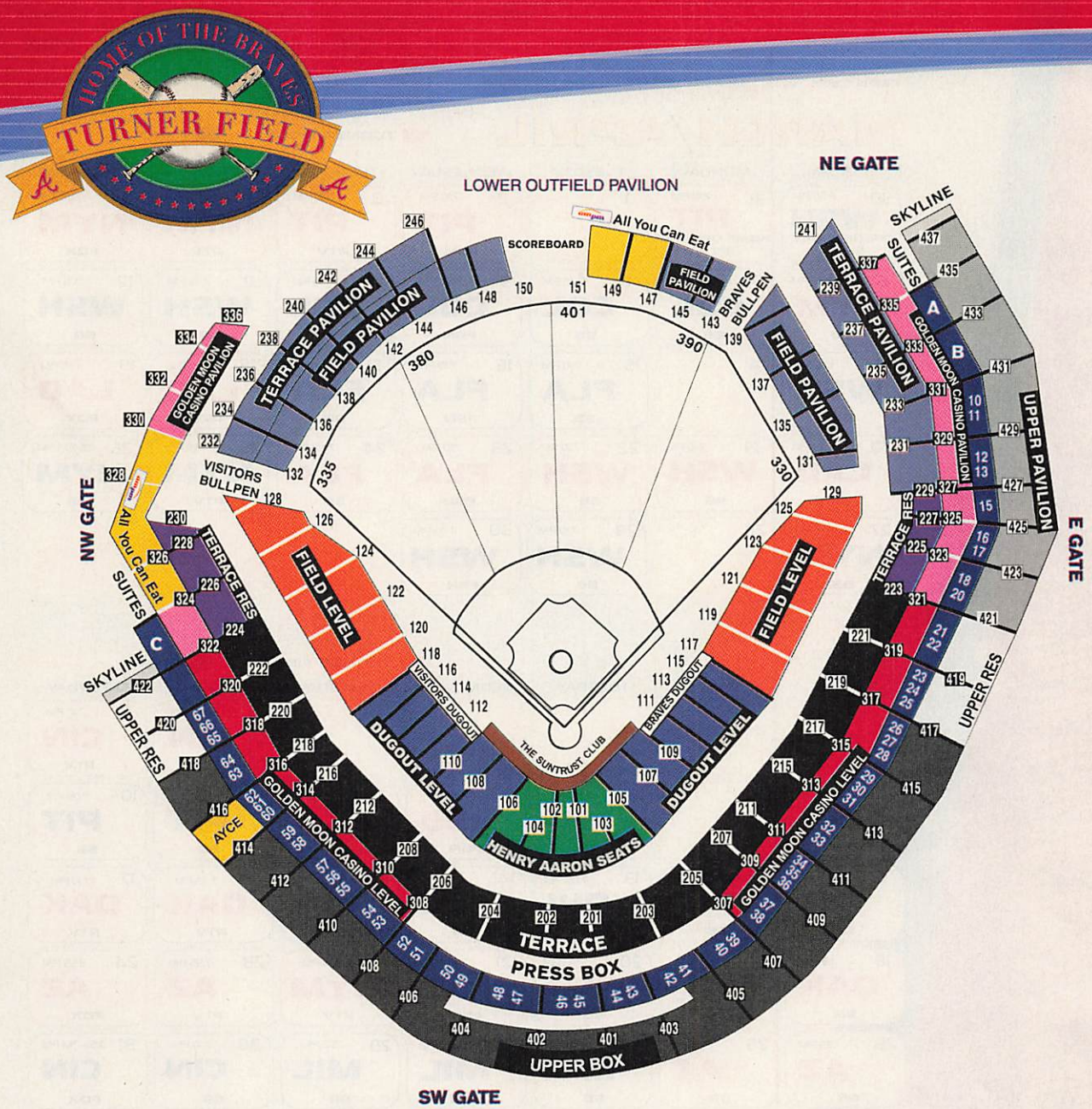
Rates for gift subscriptions are the same as above. We will send the recipient a personalized ChopTalk gift card (please specify General or Happy Holidays). When ordering, be sure to include the recipient's name and address, along with your name, address and phone number.



4-GAME PACK

Braves

	TERRACE LEVEL $140	OUTFIELD PAVILION $84	UPPER BOX $44	
OPENING DAY PACK	Mar. 31 (Pittsburgh)	May 20 (Mets)	July 31 (St. Louis)	Aug. 14 (Cubs).
NL EAST FIREWORKS PACK	April 4 (Mets)	June 6 (Philadelphia)	July 18 (Washington)	Sept. 19 (Mets).
SATURDAY PACK	April 5 (Mets)	May 17 (Oakland)	Aug. 2 (Milwaukee)	Sept. 6 (Washington).
METS PACK	April 6	May 22	Sept. 20	Sept. 21.
FRIDAY FIREWORKS PACK	April 18 (Dodgers)	May 23 (Arizona)	June 20 (Seattle)	Aug. 15 (San Francisco).
WEST COAST PACK	April 19 (Dodgers)	May 24 (Arizona)	June 21 (Seattle)	Aug. 16 (San Francisco).
SUNDAY PACK	April 20 (Dodgers)	June 22 (Seattle)	July 6 (Houston)	Aug. 17 (San Francisco).
BOBBLEHEAD GIVEAWAY PACK	April 23 (Florida)	May 21 (Mets)	June 25 (Milwaukee)	Aug. 27 (Florida).
NL CENTRAL PACK	May 3 (Cincinnati)	July 29 (St. Louis)	Aug. 1 (Milwaukee)	Aug. 12 (Cubs).
HAT GIVEAWAY PACK	May 7 (San Diego)	July 30 (St. Louis)	Aug. 26 (Florida)	Sept. 17 (Philadelphia).
HOLIDAY WEEKEND PACK	May 25 (Arizona)	May 26 (Arizona)	July 4 (Houston)	July 5 (Houston).
T-SHIRT GIVEAWAY PACK	June 4 (Florida)	July 2 (Philadelphia)	Aug. 13 (Cubs)	Sept. 10 (Colorado).

All games on WGST-AM (640), The Bull (94.9 FM), and Braves Network affiliates.

FOX Fox Broadcasting System

PTV Peachtree TV

ESPN Cable Sports Network

FSN FSN South

SS SportSouth

MARCH/APRIL

TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
30 8:05 PM **WSH** OPENING DAY ESPN	31 7:10 PM **PIT** HOME OPENER PTV	1	2 7:10 PM **PIT** FSN	3 7:10 PM **PIT** PTV	4 7:35 PM **NYM** PTV	5 3:55 PM **NYM** FOX
6 1:35 PM **NYM** SS	7 8:35 PM **COL** SS	8 8:35 PM **COL** SS	9 8:35 PM **COL** FSN	10 3:05 PM **COL** SS	11 7:35 PM **WSH** SS	12 1:05 PM **WSH** SS
13 1:35 PM **WSH** SS	14	15 7:10 PM **FLA** SS	16 7:10 PM **FLA** FSN	17 7:10 PM **FLA** SS	18 7:35 PM **LAD** PTV	19 3:55 PM **LAD** FOX
20 1:35 PM **LAD** SS	21 7:10 PM **WSH** SS	22 7:10 PM **WSH** SS	23 7:10 PM **FLA** FSN	24 7:10 PM **FLA** SS	25 7:10 PM **NYM** PTV	26 1:10 PM PM **NYM** SS
27 1:10 PM **NYM** SS	28	29 7:10 PM **WSH** SS	30 4:35 PM **WSH** FSN			

MAY

TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
				1	2 7:35 PM **CIN** PTV	3 7:10 PM **CIN** PTV
4 1:35 PM **CIN** SS	5	6 7:10 PM **SD** SS	7 7:10 PM **SD** FSN	8 1:10 PM **SD** SS	9 7:05 PM **PIT** SS	10 7:05 PM **PIT** SS
11 1:35 PM **PIT** SS	12 12:35 PM **PIT** SS	13 7:05 PM **PHI** SS	14 7:05 PM **PHI** FSN	15 7:05 PM **PHI** SS	16 7:35 PM **OAK** PTV	17 7:10 PM **OAK** PTV
18 1:35 PM **OAK** SS	19	20 7:10 PM **NYM** SS	21 7:10 PM **NYM** FSN	22 7:10 PM **NYM** PTV	23 7:35 PM **AZ** PTV	24 3:55 PM **AZ** FOX
25 1:35 PM **AZ** SS	26 1:10 PM **AZ** SS	27 8:05 PM **MIL** SS	28 8:05 PM **MIL** FSN	29 1:05 PM **MIL** SS	30 7:10 PM **CIN** SS	31 3:55 PM PM **CIN** FOX

JUNE

TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 1:15 PM **CIN** SS	2 7:10 PM **FLA** SS	3 7:10 PM **FLA** PTV	4 1:10 PM **FLA** FSN	5 7:10 PM **FLA** PTV	6 7:35 PM **PHI** PTV	7 7:10 PM **PHI** PTV
8 1:35 PM **PHI** SS	9	10 8:05 PM **CHC** PTV	11 8:05 PM **CHC** FSN	12 2:20 PM **CHC** SS	13 10:05 PM **LAA** SS	14 9:05 PM **LAA** SS
15 TBD **LAA** SS	16	17 8:05 PM **TX** PTV	18 8:05 PM **TX** FSN	19 2:05 PM **TX** SS	20 7:35 PM **SEA** PTV	21 7:10 PM **SEA** PTV
22 1:35 M **SEA** SS	23 7:10 PM **MIL** PTV	24 7:10 PM **MIL** PTV	25 1:10 PM **MIL** FSN	26	27 7:07 PM **TOR** SS	28 1:07 PM PM **TOR** SS
29 1:07 PM **TOR** SS	30					

TENTATIVE: SUBJECT TO CHANGE.
FOR SEASON, GROUP AND SUITE TICKET
INFORMATION CALL (404) 577-9100 OR VISIT braves.com

JULY

ALL-STAR GAME | TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
		1 7:10 PM PHI PTV	2 7:10 PM PHI FSN	3 7:10 PM PHI PTV	4 7:35 PM HOU PTV	5 7:10 PM HOU PTV
6 1:35 PM HOU SS	7 10:10 PM LAD SS	8 10:10 PM LAD SS	9 10:10 PM LAD FSN	10	11 10:05 PM SD SS	12 10:05 PM SD SS
13 4:05 PM SD SS	14	15 8:00 PM ALL-STAR GAME YANKEE STADIUM	16	17	18 7:35 PM WSH PTV	19 7:10 PM WSH PTV
20 1:35 PM WSH SS	21 7:10 PM FLA SS	22 7:10 PM FLA SS	23 7:10 PM FLA FSN	24	25 7:05 PM PHI PTV	26 3:55 PM PHI FOX
27 1:35 PM PHI SS	28 7:10 PM STL SS	29 7:10 PM STL PTV	30 7:10 PM STL FSN	31 7:10 PM STL PTV		

AUGUST

TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 7:35 PM MIL PTV	2 3:55 PM MIL FOX
3 1:35 PM MIL SS	4 10:15 PM SF SS	5 10:15 PM SF SS	6 3:45 PM SF FSN	7 9:40 PM AZ SS	8 9:40 PM AZ SS	9 3:55 PM AZ FOX
10 4:10 PM AZ SS	11	12 7:10 PM CHC PTV	13 7:10 PM CHC FSN	14 7:10 PM CHC PTV	15 7:35 PM SF PTV	16 7:10 PM SF PTV
17 1:35 PM SF SS	18 4:35 PM SF SS	19 7:10 PM NYM PTV	20 7:10 PM NYM FSN	21 7:10 PM NYM PTV	22 8:15 PM STL SS	23 3:55 PM STL FOX
24 2:15 PM STL SS	25	26 7:10 PM FLA SS	27 7:10 PM FLA FSN	28 7:10 PM FLA SS	29 7:35 PM WSH SS	30 7:10 PM WSH SS
31 1:35 PM WSH SS						

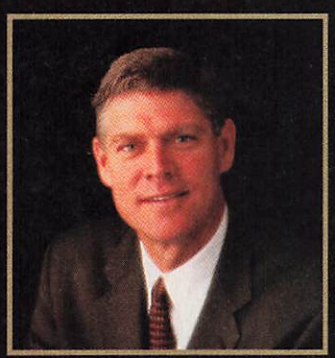
SEPTEMBER

TURNER FIELD | AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
TBD	1 1:10 PM FLA SS	2 7:10 PM FLA SS	3 1:10 PM FLA FSN	4 7:10 PM WSH PTV	5 7:35 PM WSH PTV	6 7:10 PM WSH SS
7 1:35 PM WSH SS	8	9 7:10 PM COL PTV	10 7:10 PM COL FSN	11 7:10 PM COL PTV	12 7:10 PM NYM ESPN	13 3:55 PM NYM FOX
14 1:10 PM NYM SS	15	16 7:10 PM PHI SS	17 7:10 PM PHI FSN	18 7:10 PM PHI PTV	19 7:35 PM NYM PTV	20 7:10 PM NYM SS
21 1:35 PM NYM SS	22 7:05 PM PHI PTV	23 7:05 PM PHI PTV	24 7:05 PM PHI FSN	25	26 8:05 PM HOU SS	27 7:05 PM HOU SS
28 2:05 PM HOU SS	29	30				

I WON'T CHEAT!

GAME | FANS | SELF



"Youth athletes who feel the pressure to cheat have been damaged the most by the steroid problem. Let's work together to create a drug free atmosphere in sports."

–Dale Murphy

2 TIME NL MVP, ATLANTA BRAVES

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www.iwontcheat.com

SPRING TRAINING TICKETS

Lower Level Reserved	$23.50
Upper Level Reserved	$20.50
Bleacher Reserved	$20.50
General Admission	$14.50

Individual tickets are on sale at Braves.com, the Disney Wide World of Sports box office, and Ticketmaster.com or (407) 839-3900.

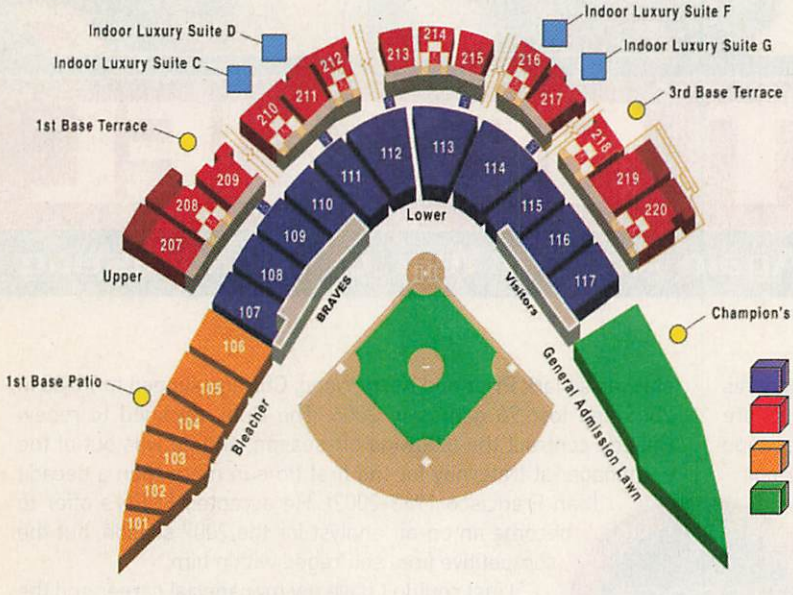
* Champion Stadium opens 3 hours before game time.

5-GAME MINI PLAN - $102.50
Mar. 8 - Houston, Mar. 10 - St. Louis, Mar. 12 - Cleveland, Mar. 15 - Tampa Bay, Mar. 20 - Detroit.

1ST HALF 3-GAME MINI PLAN - $61.50
Mar. 2 - Houston, Mar. 9 - St. Louis, Mar. 11 - Washington.

2ND HALF 3-GAME MINI PLAN - $61.50
Mar. 20 - Detroit, Mar. 23 - Houston, Mar. 27 - Mets.

NOTE: Mini-Plans include best available Upper Level Reserved or Bleacher Reserved seats. Call (407) 939-GAME (4263) for Season, Group and Mini-Plan tickets. Full Seasons Tickets are $320 for Lower Level Reserved and $280 for Upper Level Reserved and Bleacher Reserved.



CHAMPION STADIUM
AT DISNEY'S WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS

FEBRUARY/MARCH

DISNEY | AWAY | EXHIBITION

Tentative; subject to change; times pending.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			27 1:05 PM UNIV. OF GEORGIA	28 1:05 PM LAD @ VERO BEACH	29 1:05 PM LAD ESPN	1 1:05 PM HOU @ KISSIMMEE
2 1:05 PM HOU	3 1:10 PM NYM @ PORT ST. LUCIE	4 1:05 PM PHI	5 1:05 PM CLE @ WINTER HAVEN	6 1:05 PM DET @ LAKELAND	7 1:05 PM DET	8 1:05 PM CIN * 1:05 PM HOU
9 1:05 PM STL	10 1:05 PM STL SS	11 7:05 PM WAS FSN	12 7:05 PM CLE FSN	13 1:05 PM DET @ LAKELAND	14 1:05 PM PHI @ CLEARWATER	15 1:05 PM HOU * 1:05 PM TAM
16 1:05 PM STL @ JUPITER	17 1:05 PM STL @ JUPITER	18	19 7:05 PM HOU @ KISSIMMEE	20 7:05 PM DET SS	21 1:05 PM CLE FSN	22 1:05 PM WAS @ VIERA
23 1:05 PM HOU SS	24 1:05 PM CLE @ WINTER HAVEN	25 1:10 PM NYM @ PORT ST. LUCIE	26 1:05 PM WAS FSN	27 1:05 PM NYM ESPN	28 7:10 PM CLE @ TURNER FIELD PTV	29 1:10 PM CLE @ TURNER FIELD PTV

Mar. 8 vs. Cincinnati @ Sarasota. Mar. 15 vs. Houston @ Kissimmee.

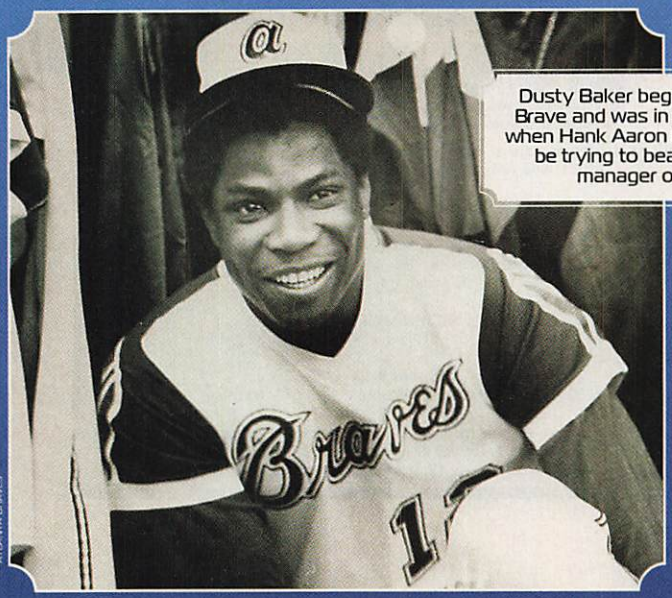
* SPLIT SQUAD

ESPN Cable Sports Network

FSN FSN South

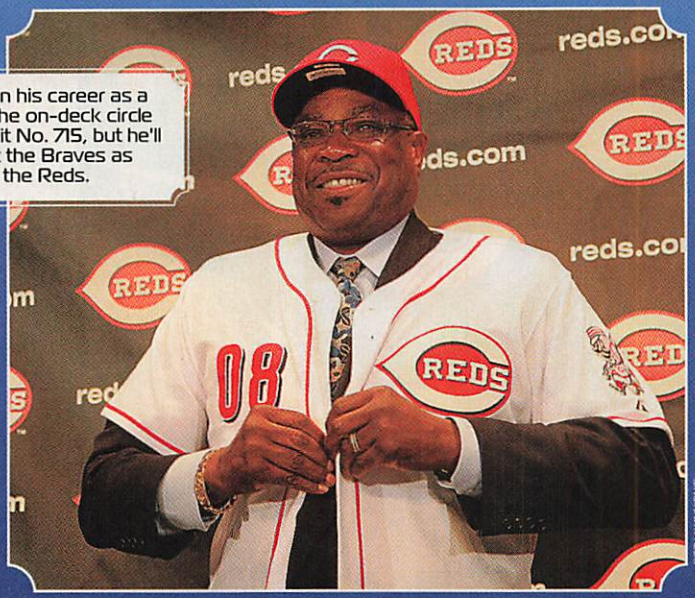
SS SportSouth

PTV Peachtree TV



ATLANTA BRAVES

Dusty Baker began his career as a Brave and was in the on-deck circle when Hank Aaron hit No. 715, but he'll be trying to beat the Braves as manager of the Reds.



CINCINNATI REDS

DUGOUT SEQUEL

Dusty Baker Is Managing Again After a Year of Broadcasting

BY BRIAN KNAPP

DUSTY BAKER wants nothing more than to cement his managerial legacy with a World Series championship. After more than 1,100 victories, three division titles, and one National League pennant, the 58-year-old, three-time NL Manager of the Year ('93, '97, 2000) arrives in Cincinnati to guide one of baseball's most revered franchises.

In a city thirsting for success, Baker seems an ideal fit.

"Very rarely do you inherit an upper-division team," Baker said. "I think we've got a great start on things. They're serious about this town and bringing pride back to the city."

Baker agreed to a three-year deal with the Reds in October and replaces interim manager Pete Mackanin in the Cincinnati dugout, where his reputation and track record will precede him.

In 14 years as a manager, Baker has led teams to five 90-win seasons – including 103 with the 1993 Giants (one less than the Braves) – and one World Series appearance (2002 Giants). The Reds, on the other hand, have endured seven consecutive losing seasons and have reached only one Fall Classic (1990) since the 1970s when the famed "Big Red Machine" ran amok.

First contacted by the Cincinnati front office after Jerry Narron was relieved of his managerial duties last summer, Baker remained on the team's radar until he was hired in the fall.

"It didn't take very long to get a deal done," he said. "They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. You go where you're wanted."

The feeling of being wanted had become foreign to Baker during his final days as manager of the Cubs (2003-06). After he steered them to the brink of the 2003 World Series, the club slowly soured on his direction. Undone by injuries to young pitching stalwarts Mark Prior and Kerry Wood, Chicago slipped to 79-83 in 2005 and lost 96 games in 2006. The Cubs declined to renew Baker's contract the following off-season, and he was out of the managerial fraternity for the first time in more than a decade (San Francisco 1993-2002). He accepted ESPN's offer to become an on-air analyst for the 2007 season, but the competitive fires still raged within him.

"I just couldn't have my managerial career end the way it ended in Chicago," Baker said. "That was the first time I was really sent away, and I couldn't live with that. I need a championship – or two – to feel like a winner."

Cincinnati opened the door for his return, because Baker found common ground with team owner Bob Castellini and general manager Wayne Krivsky.

"This guy is a winner," Krivsky said. "He's a very sincere, genuine person that relates well to players. He's someone that communicates, somebody that creates an attitude that winning is the only thing we're after here - but we're going to go about it the right way and professional way."

Baker has a wealth of experience from which to draw, including 19 years as a player – the first eight of which came in Atlanta. He debuted with the Braves as a 19-year-old in 1968, though he admits he never wanted to be drafted by the franchise.

"I prayed the night before that the Braves wouldn't draft me," Baker said. "I got the call [that they had chosen me] and thought the Lord hadn't heard me. It ended up being the best thing that happened to me."

He joined the team on a full-time basis in 1972, when he batted a career-best .321 and played alongside the incomparable Hank Aaron. Over the course of the next two seasons, Baker watched in

admiration as Aaron pursued Babe Ruth's longstanding career home run mark. He marveled at his teammates' steely resolve in the face of death threats and racial hostility.

"I learned how to be a man," Baker said. "I saw an amount of discipline and desire I didn't know one man could have. I didn't know there was still all this hatred, vile and animosity in our country. I realized how much deeper things went. It was more than just a baseball record."

An early spring chill settled on what then was called Atlanta Stadium on the night of April 8, 1974, as the 39-year-old Aaron prepared for his second at-bat against Dodgers lefthander Al Downing. Baker stood on deck.

"He told me he was going to hurry up and get it over with," Baker remembered. "I said, 'Okay.'"

As number 715 sailed over the left-center field fence, more than 53,000 fans erupted. Baker did not move.

"I was on deck," he said. "I could have been the first one out to the plate, but I stayed back. That was Hank's moment."

In 1973, Baker joined Aaron as the only Atlanta Braves in the 20/20 (home runs/steals) club at that time, and they remained the only two members until Dale Murphy joined them in 1982.

Baker remained a Brave through the completion of the 1975 season, then was dealt to the Dodgers, along with infielder Ed Goodson, in exchange for Jimmy Wynn, Tom Paciorek, Lee Lacy and Jerry Royster. He enjoyed his most productive years in Los Angeles, where he made two All-Star appearances, was named Most Valuable Player of the 1977 National League Championship Series, and helped lead the Dodgers to the 1981 World Series title. He also won a Gold Glove and two Silver Sluggers.

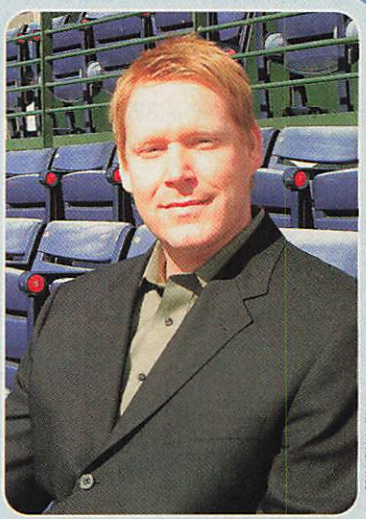
Baker finished his 19-year playing career in San Francisco and Oakland before retiring in 1986 with a .278 lifetime batting average and 242 home runs (his Braves average from 1968-75 also was .278 with 77 homers). Now in the midst of a managerial career, he can reflect on some four decades of service in the major leagues – as a player, coach and manager.

"It's been blessed," said Baker, who resides in Sacramento, Calif., with his wife of 13 years, Melissa, and 8-year-old son. "When you're a 26th-round draft pick and end up in baseball for 40 years, you've definitely been blessed."

Baker operates a baseball instructional camp for kids each summer. For information, visit dustybaker.com.

HOW I MADE IT TO THE MAJORS

HILL SCOTT
DIRECTOR OF MARKETING


ATLANTA BRAVES

BY STEVE FALL

WHILE THEY ALREADY have a huge following – one that few professional baseball teams can match – the Braves never stop trying to land new fans and generate excitement among their diehards.

"The briefest way to say it is: My job is to build the Braves brand," said Hill Scott, the club's director of marketing.

Scott and his staff do that through traditional media like print, television and radio, as well as via the Braves' website. The club's mobile marketing team called BAT – which stands for "Braves Around Town" – also focuses on building the team's brand.

"While players may have come and gone and things may have changed, what's consistent about that Braves logo is how it makes you feel as a fan," said the 38-year-old Scott. "They're not only representing Atlanta, but the Southeast in general. And it means so much to people who have been watching them for years. You have so much history here, with Hank Aaron all the way through the 14 straight division championships, that reaches across generations."

Scott grew up a big Dodgers fan in Los Angeles. He pitched for his high school team and comes from a baseball family. His great grandfather, Bob Shawkey, was a four-time 20-game winner who pitched for the legendary Yankees teams of the 1920s, led by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

After graduating from the University of Oregon, Scott went to work in the oil and gas industry for ConocoPhillips. He held different positions in operations, and then returned to school. He earned an MBA focused in marketing from Arizona State University, and moved into brand management for ConocoPhillips. During the final five and a half of his 13 years with the company, he served as their director of sports marketing.

"I had responsibility over their entire sports marketing and sponsorship portfolio, which included a number of baseball teams, NBA, NHL, NASCAR, and college sports," said Scott.

Always interested in working in Major League Baseball, Scott jumped at the opportunity when he heard about an open position with the Braves. After several hours of interviews, he landed the job and started last July.

"I love talking to people who are passionate about what you're promoting," said Scott. "Braves fans are very passionate about their team, and the fact that you have an organization with a long history of not only winning, but doing it with class."

Scott believes that some young people seeking jobs in baseball take an incorrect approach.

"I think that many people who want to get into the field of sports business make the mistake of thinking that they'll be great at this because they're a huge sports fan," he said. "It's best to recognize that when you are working in a baseball team's front office, you are definitely in a business environment. Yes, it's a game being played by the players on the field, but the people working in the front office are doing their best to drive the overall success of the organization. That requires a marketing, analytical and business-minded approach."

ALUMNI NOTES

- The Pirates named **Sid Bream** (1B, 1991-93) a coach at State College of the Class A New York-Penn League.
- **Darrell Evans** (3B/1B, 1969-76, '89) was named coach of the Orange County Flyers in the independent Golden League.
- **John McHale**, who was president and general manager of the Milwaukee Braves from 1959-65 and then oversaw the franchise's move to Atlanta in 1966, died Jan. 17 at the age of 86. He also was the first president of the Montreal Expos in 1968 and was that franchise's GM for 18 seasons.
- **Don Cardwell** (RHP, 1970) died Jan. 14 at age 72. In 1960, he pitched a no-hitter for the Cubs against the Cardinals.
- The Cardinals named **Keith Mitchell** (OF, 1991) hitting coach and **Dennis Martinez** (RHP, 1998) pitching coach for Palm Beach of the Class-A Florida State League and **Derek Lilliquist** (LHP, 1989-90) Jupiter complex pitching coordinator.
- Braves Hall of Famer **David Justice** (OF, 1989-96) elected not to return as an analyst of Yankees games carried by the YES Network so that he could stay in San Diego and supervise the rebuilding of the home he lost to October wildfires. He will contribute to the channel's web site.
- **Chris Woodward** (INF, 2007) signed a minor league contract with the Yankees.
- **Kent Mercker** (LHP, 1989-95, 2003) signed a minor league contact with Cincinnati.
- The Milwaukee Brewers exercised their option for 2009 on manager **Ned Yost**'s (Coach, 1991-2002) contract.
- **Rudy Seanez** (RHP, 1998-2000, '01) signed with the Dodgers.
- **Johnny Estrada** (C, 2003-05) signed with the Nationals.
- **Jaret Wright** (RHP, 2003-04) signed a minor league contract with Pittsburgh.
- **Nick Green** (INF, 2004) signed a minor league contract with the Yankees.
- **Paul Bako** (C, 2000-01) signed a minor league contract with Cincinnati.
- The White Sox signed **Octavio Dotel** (RHP, 2007) to a two-year contract.
- **Tom Martin** (LHP, 2004-05) signed a minor league contract with the Dodgers.
- **Dan Kolb** (RHP, 2005) signed a minor league contract with the Red Sox.
- Baltimore signed **Lance Cormier** (RHP, 2006-07) to a minor league contract.
- Kansas City signed **Damon Hollins** (OF, 1998, 2004) to a minor league contract.
- **Steve Torrealba** (C, 2001-02) signed a minor league contract with Boston.
- **Pedro Swann** (OF, 2000) opened Pro Swing Sports Baseball Academy, an instructional facility in Middletown, Delaware, and named **Dwayne Henry** (RHP, 1989-90) the pitching instructor.
- **Chad Fox** (RHP, 1997) signed a minor league deal with the Cubs.
- **Johnny Logan** (SS, 1951-61) spoke at the Central Wisconsin Baseball Hall of Fame banquet Jan. 17.
- Nearly 100 fans packed into Long Wong's Chinese-American Sports Bar in Milwaukee Feb. 2 to watch the first public screening of the only known TV kinescope of the complete fourth game of the 1957 World Series. The Braves won, 7-5, in 10 innings en route to winning the Series in seven games. Among those in attendance were Dr. Ed Mathews, whose father, the late **Eddie Mathews** (3B/1B, 1952-66; Coach 1971-72; Mgr. 1972-74), hit the game-winning home run, and **Felix Mantilla** (INF/OF, 1956-61), who pinch-ran and scored the tying run.

BIRTHDAYS

MARCH

1ST	NICK STRINCEVICH (93)
	JIM PANTHER (63)
	TONY CASTILLO (45)
2ND	DON SCHWALL (72)
	RON GANT (43)
	RAUL MONDESI (37)
3RD	CHUCK CARY (48)
	MATT DIAZ (30)
4TH	BOB W. JOHNSON (72)
	JEFF DEDMON (48)
	BRIAN HUNTER (40)
	ED GIOVANOLA (39)
	DAVE STEVENS (38)
5TH	DEL CRANDALL (78)
	PHIL ROOF (67)
	MIKE HESSMAN (30)
6TH	RICK BEHENNA (48)
7TH	GLEN CLARK (67)
	JEFF BURROUGHS (57)
	ALBERT HALL (50)
8TH	JIM BOUTON (69)
9TH	DARREL CHANEY (60)
	TERRY MULHOLLAND (45)
	C.J. NITKOWSKI (35)
	WAYNE FRANKLIN (34)
	WILLY AYBAR (25)
10TH	KEN MACKENZIE (74)
11TH	STEVE REED (42)
12TH	JIMMY WYNN (66)
	DALE MURPHY (52)
13TH	RAY MARTIN (83)
	GARY KOLB (68)
	MARV STAEHLE (66)
	JORGE FABREGAS (38)
14TH	JERRY WILLARD (48)
15TH	ROBERT FICK (34)
17TH	JIMMIE HALL (70)
	CITO GASTON (64)
18TH	PAT JARVIS (67)
	GERONIMO BERROA (43)
	CORKY MILLER (32)
20TH	PAT CORRALES (67)
22ND	GEORGE CROWE (87)
	MATT SINATRO (48)
23RD	JOHNNY LOGAN (82)
	BOBBY DEWS (70)
	MIKE REMLINGER (42)
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EDITOR & PUBLISHER

AN-TIC-I-PA-TION

FAMED AMERICAN POET Emily Dickinson once wrote, "March is the month of expectation."

Sounds like a baseball fan, though given her time of life (1830-86), that's not likely. She was from Massachusetts, however, so perhaps she was a Braves fan in her later years, when the franchise was located in Boston and was winning National League championships as the Red Stockings (there was no American League).

We'll never know, but Emily certainly could "talk the talk" of a baseball fan.

In baseball, it doesn't get any better than March, when winter can be forgotten, baseball games begin in training camps, and every team - especially the one that counts - is unbeaten, with a World Championship only seven months away.

Yes, it is the month of expectation... an-tic-i-pa-tion, if you prefer Carly Simon (another New Englander) and catsup commercials to poetry.

Even with Johan Santana wearing Mets orange and blue, there's no reason to think the Braves won't be competitive in the NL East, no reason to think they can't win the division - and even more.

Sure, the skeptics can come up with reasons why they won't - but there's probably not a single one of them that predicted the Rockies and Diamondbacks would meet in last year's NLCS, with Colorado advancing to the World Series.

Those two teams proved that talent and youthful energy often can accomplish more than payroll dollars. The Braves have a nice blend of both - youthful talent intent on making its mark and experienced veterans with high salaries. The experts tend to rely primarily on what they see in the latter when making their prognostications.

Big mistake - as they discovered in 1991 when the Braves went "worst to first."

There's no need for such a dramatic turnaround this year. The Braves were in the playoff race almost to the end last season. They'll be in it again this year, and perhaps the biggest reason to be optimistic about their chances of winning the division is that we have not yet seen what Jeff Francoeur (age 24), Brian McCann (24), Kelly Johnson (26) and Yunel Escobar (25) *really* can do.

Goodness. Escobar wasn't even on the 40-man roster last spring training!

All four of these talents already are impact players. But they're still developing, still learning. They are the backbone of the future of the franchise, and they all have superstar potential.

Significant improvement by these four players alone would go a long way toward carrying the Braves to the postseason. It's a fact that Frank Wren points out in his column on page 19. And it's a fact that most of the prognosticators will overlook when sizing up this team.

So, keep an eye on what this foursome does this month at Disney - and more importantly, what it does once the season opens March 30 in Washington, D.C. It's hard to believe it's that close!

With this issue, ChopTalk begins an exciting new relationship with FSN South and SportSouth. The No. 1 source for Braves television, these two networks will supply a monthly column to keep readers informed on their inside perspective on the team and about their broad coverage that promises to bring you more nightly Braves action than anyone has in years - if ever. This includes same-night replays of all their telecasts, so you shouldn't miss a play.

And when you're watching FSN South and SportSouth, be sure to watch for ChopTalk, too!

Our thanks to Mark Kotsay and his family for allowing ChopTalk to visit their home before he's even put on a Braves uniform. We hope you enjoy the early insight on what he brings to the Braves.

The outstanding photography on the cover and with the Kotsay story comes through the lens of Andy Hayt, whose work has graced the covers of Sports Illustrated, Time, Newsweek, Life and many other publications. What a treat to have him contribute to ChopTalk.

THIS ISSUE OF CHOPTALK was mailed Feb. 21. The April issue will be mailed Mar. 20.

BEYOND BASEBALL

BY **PATTY RASMUSSEN**

Jeff Francoeur proudly displays the Dale Earnhardt jacket he won in the auction at Tom Glavine's Spring Training benefit for the Georgia Transplant Foundation.

BIDDING WITH THE FISHES

TOM GLAVINE'S Spring Training, an annual casino night to benefit the Georgia Transplant Foundation, was held Feb. 8 at the Georgia Aquarium in downtown Atlanta. Glavine and his wife, **Chris**, welcomed well over 400 guests to the event. Among the Braves in attendance were **John Smoltz**, **Tim Hudson** with wife, **Kim**, **Jeff Francoeur** and his wife, **Catie**, **Brian McCann** and his wife, **Ashley**, pitcher **Buddy Carlyle**, pitching coach **Roger McDowell**, and former Braves **Mark Lemke**, **Ron Gant** and his wife, **Heather**, and **Jay Howell** with his wife, **Linda**. An acoustic guitar singed by Eric Clapton fetched the top bid of the live auction, a cool $7,500. Also during the live auction, Francoeur snagged a framed jacket, signed by the late, great NASCAR driver, **Dale Earnhardt** for $3,000, while Hudson took home a signed and framed **Nolan Ryan** jersey ($2,000). Hudson made out like a bandit in the silent auction, adding a signed **Reggie Jackson** bat ($300), a signed **Steve Carlton** bat ($175), and an autographed Auburn University football ($250) to his memorabilia collection. In honor of Glavine's career 300th win last season, all attendees were given a t-shirt at the end of the night, which read: "Tom Glavine August 5, 2007 300th Win." Event officials put the initial projections of funds raised at around $500,000.

PATTY RASMUSSEN

THE WEDDING of **Kelly Johnson** and **Lauren Thacker** took place Jan. 26 in Atlanta. Their ceremony was attended by several Braves players and their wives, including **Jeff** and **Catie Francoeur**, **Brian** and **Ashley McCann**, and several coaches and wives. The Johnsons' reception was held at the Capital City Club in Atlanta. The couple honeymooned in Hawaii...

The wedding and reception of former Braves pitcher **Horacio Ramirez** and **Veronica Palacios**, also Jan. 26 in Atlanta, was one part wedding, one part family reunion, one part fiesta! Former Braves pitcher **Chris Reitsma** served as Ramirez's best man. Reitsma, who lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, was accompanied by his wife, **Janelle**, who enjoyed a lunch date with her friend, **Kim Hudson**, during the brief visit to Atlanta. Also in attendance were rehabbing reliever **Mike Gonzalez** and former Braves infielder **Nick Green**. Braves video coordinator **Rob Smith** and his wife, **Carmen**, had their first "date night" since the birth of their son, **Tyler**, in December. Among the evening's special touches, pastor **Jason Spears** asked the couple during the vows if they would "support each other through every season, and spring training." A mariachi band played as the couple left the church and later in the lobby of the Twelve Hotel. The groom's cake was decorated to look like an L.A. Lakers basketball card for Ramirez, a passionate Lakers fan. And in keeping with the Lakers theme, each guest received a chocolate basketball "card" embellished with a photo of the couple with the Lakers logo in the background...

Chipper Jones had a good time in late January buying furnishings for his newly-finished game room/memorabilia room in the basement of his 24,000 square-foot Roswell, Ga., home. "I got a poker table, a billiard table," said Jones. "It's going to be great!" Jones spent a week at his Double Dime Ranch for the last hunt of the season. Guests at the ranch included teammates **Chuck James** and **Tyler Yates**, Dodgers

pitcher **Jonathan Broxton**, Anaheim Angels catcher **Jeff Mathis**, and Jones' agent and friend, **B.B. Abbott**. It was Yates' first time visiting the ranch. He got his first buck, an 8-pointer, using a bow. "I'm having the horns mounted on a plaque," said Yates who said he looks forward to another visit to the Double Dime...

Jones also made a quick trip to Las Vegas in early February, taking in the SHOT Show, a hunting and gaming exposition where he ran into former teammate and fellow hunting enthusiast, **Ryan Klesko**. According to Jones, Klesko, who was accompanied by **Barry Bonds**, has "officially retired." Jones was keynote speaker at the Feb. 9 Georgia Tech Baseball Benefit held at the Georgia Tech Hotel and Convention Center in Midtown Atlanta...

In addition to his emcee duties at the Braves 400 Club's **Eddie Glennon** Gameboree, **Pete Van Wieren** also was the featured speaker at a meeting of the Magnolia Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). The meeting was held on Feb. 9 at Turner Field. Van Wieren was also on hand Feb. 15 at an event held in Washington, Ga., honoring legendary broadcaster **Ernie Harwell**. Harwell made his name as "The Voice" of the Detroit Tigers but began his career calling games of the Atlanta Crackers. Harwell, 90 and retired since 2002, is a Washington native. He was inducted into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in a ceremony in Atlanta on Feb. 16...

Hawaiian **Tyler Yates** and Australian pitchers **Peter Moylan** and **Phil Stockman** attended their first professional hockey game on Feb. 9, watching the Atlanta Thrashers defeat the Tampa Bay Lightning, 2-1...

John Smoltz finished the **Michael Jordan** Charity Golf Tournament tied for second in a rain-shortened final round. The tournament took place Jan. 16-18 at the Oceans Club Golf Course at Atlantis resort in the Bahamas. According to Smoltz's caddy, former Braves catcher **Greg Olson**, "The rain came down in buckets. John was mad. He wanted to keep playing."...

Bobby Dews, Braves senior baseball advisor, has become a writer-in-residence at Andrew College in Cuthbert, Ga. Dews, who has written a number of books including, "Legends, Demons, and Dreams", a collection of short stories, sat in on creative writing classes taught by Dr. **Lela Phillips**. As writer-in-residence, Dews offered his insight and experience in writing to young creative writing students...

Pitching coach **Roger McDowell**, wife **Gloria**, and their daughters, **Amanda** and **Rachel**, decided to put down roots in the Atlanta area, relocating from Palm Springs, Calif., in February...

Kim Hudson attended the Professional Athletes Outreach Women's Getaway Weekend, a conference for wives of pro athletes, in Kansas City, Jan. 18-20...

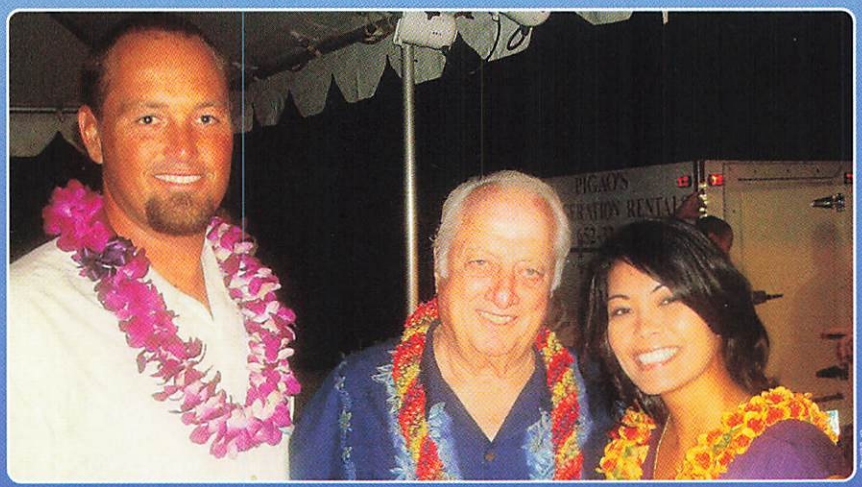
Broadcasters **Fernando Palacios** and **Pete Manzano** will broadcast two Braves games each week on Viva 105.7, a Clear Channel radio station for Spanish-speaking listeners in the Atlanta area.

STRATEGISTS

ANDREW WILSON/ATLANTA

Bobby Cox visits Cindy Donald and an unidentified child at a benefit for Donald.

BOBBY COX and fellow managers **Fredi Gonzalez** (Florida Marlins) and **Ned Yost** (Milwaukee Brewers) once again teamed up to support the **Cindy Donald** Fund at a benefit held in Marietta, Ga., on Jan. 26. Cindy, 24, was paralyzed from the neck down in an accident three years ago. Gonzalez heard her story from a friend and he quickly enlisted the help of his managerial buddies to bring in signed memorabilia and raise awareness. Over $25,000 was raised, with funds going toward offsetting the costs of Cindy's rehabilitation at Atlanta's Shepherds Spinal Center.



SPECIAL

Tyler and Liezel Yates showed their Hawaiian hospitality to legendary Dodgers manager Tom Lasorda when he visited their home island of Kauai.

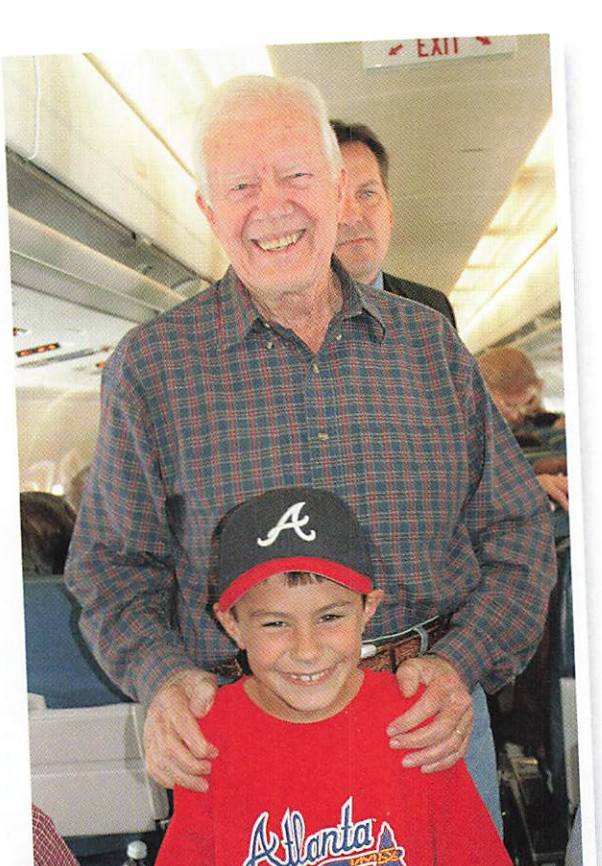
ALOHA-SORDA!

TYLER YATES threw out the first pitch at the Lihue (Kauai, Hawaii) Baseball League Opener on Jan. 19, and later that day, was the opening day speaker at the Koloa Youth Baseball Association, where Yates, a native of Hawaii, grew up playing ball. On Jan. 21, Yates and his wife, **Liezel**, attended a dinner with local business leaders in honor of Hall of Fame manager **Tom Lasorda**, who was on the island of Kauai to speak the following night at a Chamber of Commerce function.

TALKIN' CHOP

LETTERS & PHOTOS FROM OUR READERS

WHETHER YOU'RE HAVING FUN AT TURNER FIELD, EXPERIENCING A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH YOUR FAVORITE BRAVES PLAYER, OR JUST SHOWING OFF YOUR COLLECTION OF BRAVES STUFF OR TRYING ON YOUR NEW BRAVES SHIRT, WE WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT AND SEE A PICTURE.



FIRST FAN

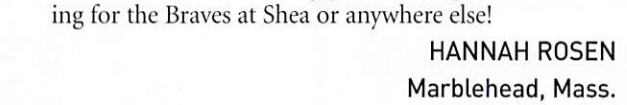
On a trip to Colorado in 2006, my son, Landon, was able to discuss his love for the Braves with another huge Braves fan, President Jimmy Carter. He couldn't have been nicer to us. Not only did he take time to talk to Landon and take a picture with him, but he also spoke to everyone else on the plane. What a memorable flight!

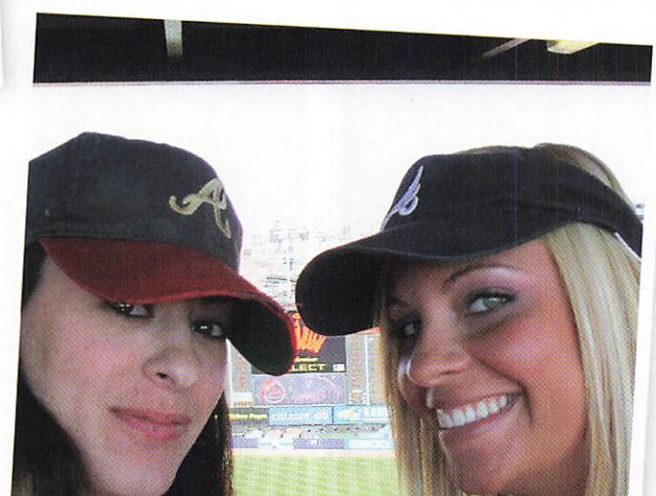
STEPHANIE EBUNA
Kennesaw, Ga.

BRAVE SOULS

I've lived in Massachusetts my entire life, but I am a die-hard Braves fan. When they played the Mets in April, my friend Katie (who I have now forced to be a Braves fan) and I came to New York to cheer them on. Here is a picture of us in full Braves gear in Shea Stadium, where we were booed by just about every single person. When we got back to Manhattan, people kept stopping us to ask if we really wore those outfits to Shea. What those people failed to realize is that it will take more than 50,000 angry fans to keep me from rooting for the Braves at Shea or anywhere else!

HANNAH ROSEN
Marblehead, Mass.





McCANN SIGHTING

I am 12 years old, and I had an amazing birthday last year. My mom and my grandma took me to San Francisco to see the All-Star Game. Even though the National League didn't win, I still had the best time of my life. When we got on the plane to go home, we saw a very strong and big man, and my mom said, "That looks a lot like Brian McCann." I said, "No, Mom, that is Brian McCann." My mom dared me to go over to him and say, "Hi!" So, I did. After we got off the plane, we took a picture with him. He is the nicest person you could ever meet.

BEN BURRIS
Charleston, S.C

CHOPTALK AND THE ATLANTA BRAVES SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

FENWAY FUN

We were married in January '07, but we decided to wait a few months to take our honeymoon. We found the perfect trip for baseball lovers when our Atlanta Braves played the Red Sox in Boston. We were lucky enough to get tickets to two of the three games and had the greatest time in historic Fenway Park. Every Atlanta fan we passed had a smile and a wave for us - even the Boston fans were welcoming! Some of our friends and family thought we were crazy to share our honeymoon with the Braves, but we share so much of our lives with this team that it seemed perfect to us.

CHRISTINA & CHRIS COLLINSWORTH

Macon, Ga.

ACROSS THE POND

Firstly, I would like to thank you for printing my letter late last year (Aug. '07). I'm "Jolly Good Fan." Secondly, on receiving my January copy of ChopTalk, I learned that my hero, Tom Glavine, is coming home. Thank you for the extensive coverage about him, his family and his career. May I wish him every success. We are so pleased to have you back, Tom.

MAUREEN SPEAR

Nottingham, England

SHARE YOUR BRAVES FEVER!

WRITE TO US

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Conyers, Ga. 30013-8750

Letters@ChopTalkonline.com

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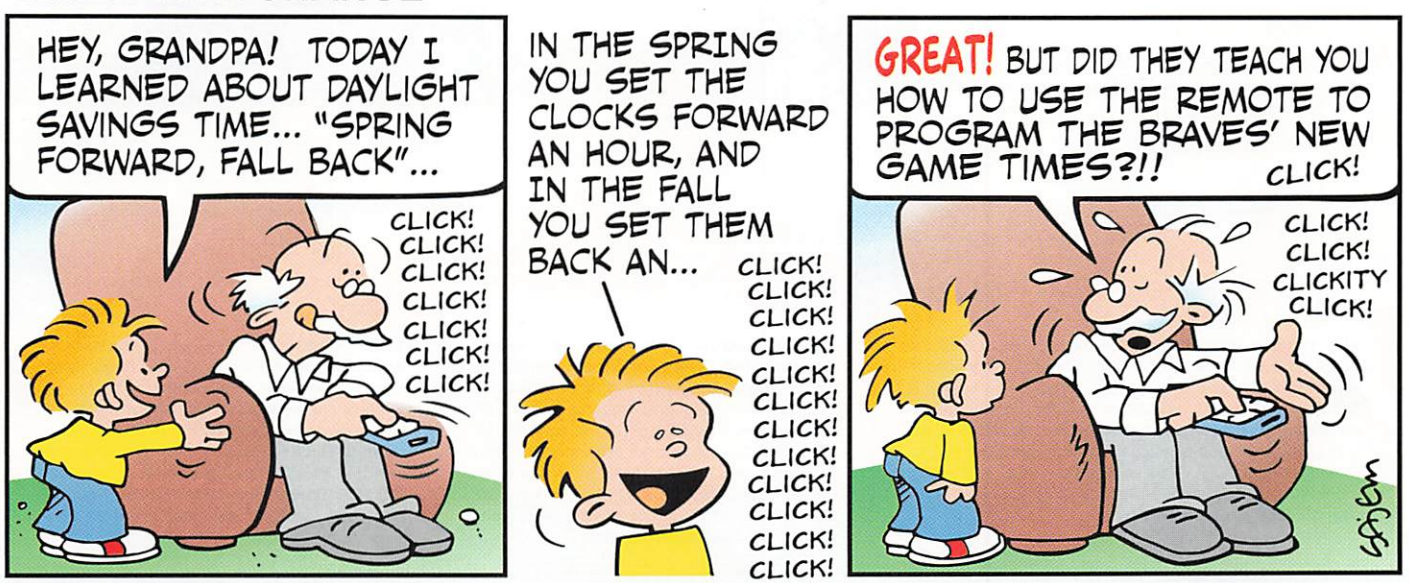
WRITE THE BRAVES

Atlanta Braves
P.O. Box 4064
Atlanta, Ga. 30302

For the Braves players, Bobby Cox, the coaches, broadcasters, or members of the front office.

If you request a response, be sure to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Never send anything of value that you want returned. This is no guarantee of a reply.

TIME FOR A CHANGE


HEY, GRANDPA! TODAY I LEARNED ABOUT DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME... "SPRING FORWARD, FALL BACK"...
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CLICK!
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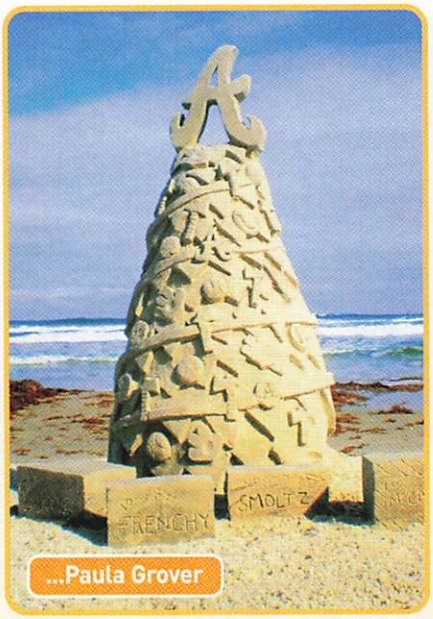
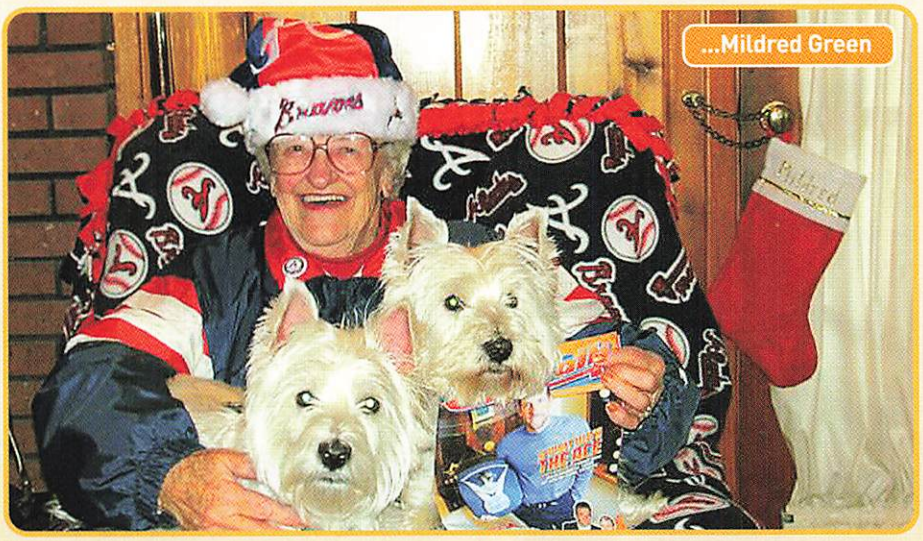
THE WINNERS ARE...

THANKS to everyone who participated in the ChopTalk Holiday Photo Contest. Some of the winning photos are featured on this page, and here's a lost of winners and their prizes:

- 1957 Milwaukee Braves 50th Anniversary Jacket - **Paula Grover, Daytona Beach, Fla.**
- John Smoltz Prize Package & '57 Reunion DVD - **Richard W. Blackwell, Jacksonville, Fla.**
- Braves Santa, Chipper Figurine, & '57 Reunion DVD - **Katherine Goodson, McMinnville, Tenn.**
- Chipper Figurine & '57 Reunion DVD - **Mildred Green, Jonesboro, Ga.**
- Warren Spahn Award Prize Pack, Chipper Figurine & '57 Reunion DVD - **Gayle Castleberry, Nashville, Ark.**
- **Sarah Davis, Edgefield, S.C.** - Chipper Figurine & '57 Reunion DVD.
- **Henry & Cole Giles, Mechanicsville, Va.** - Chipper Figurine & '57 Reunion DVD.
- **Wes Combs, Springfield, Mo.** - Skip Caray t-shirt & '57 Reunion DVD.
- **Sister Marian, New York, NY** - Chipper Figurine & '57 Reunion DVD.





FAN CLUBS

BRAVES 400 CLUB

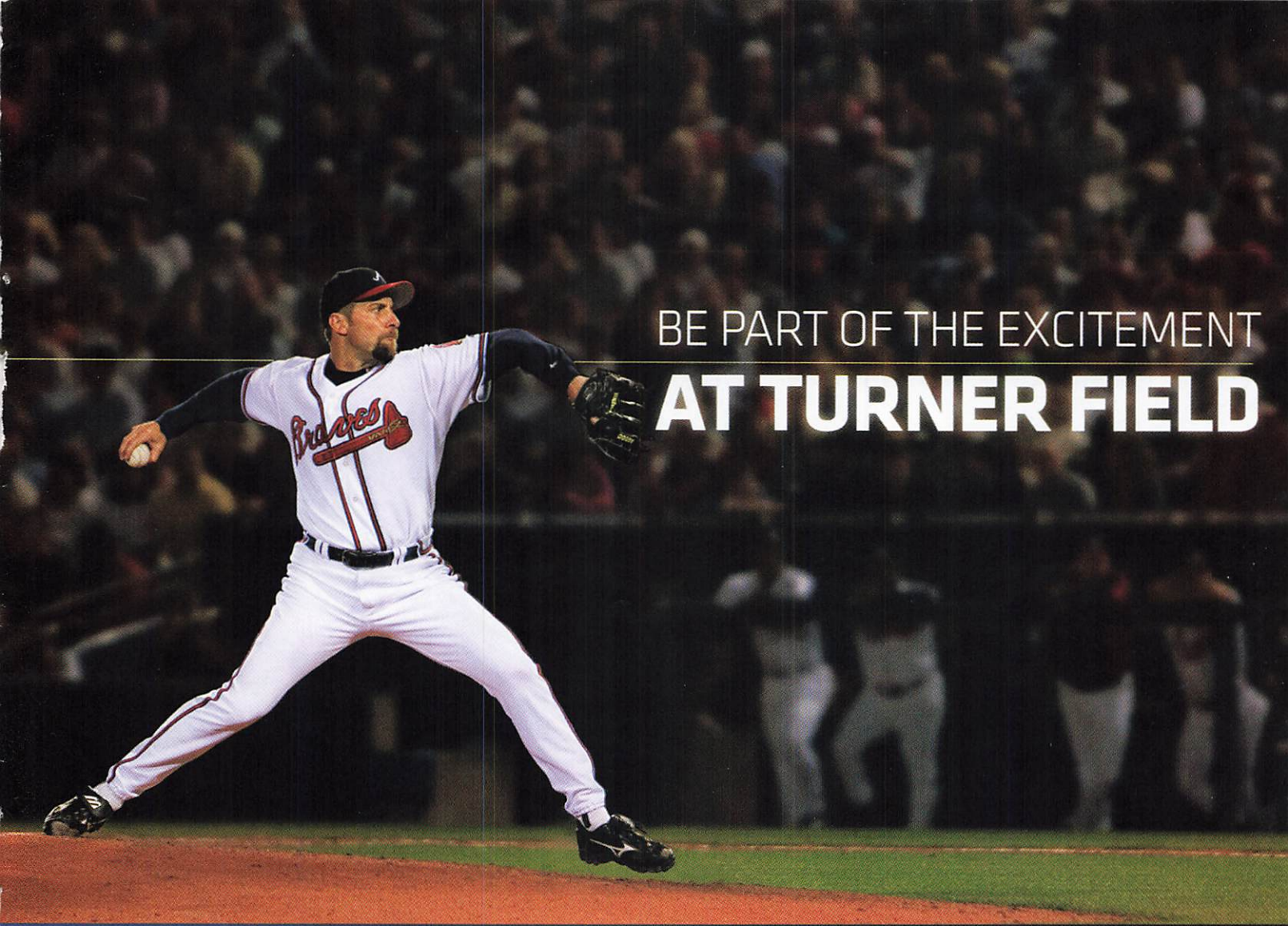
The Braves 400 Club is the official fan club of the Atlanta Braves. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting baseball at all levels. Annual membership is $25 and includes a newsletter and the opportunity to participate in activities such as road trips, luncheons, the annual banquet, and charitable events. Send payment to: Braves 400 Club, P.O. Box 7689, Atlanta, Ga. 30309. For more information, call the organization's hotline at (770) 416-4539 or visit braves400.org.

MILWAUKEE BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The Milwaukee Braves Historical Association is a non-profit organization that promotes the memory of the Milwaukee Braves (1953-65). Annual membership is $25 and includes a newsletter. Send payment to: Milwaukee Braves Historical Association, c/o Express News, W130 N10437 Washington Dr., Germantown, Wisc. 53022. For information, call (414) 347-1212 or visit milwaukee-braveshistoricalassociation.com.

BOSTON BRAVES HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The Boston Braves Historical Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to keeping alive the memory of the Braves in the city where the franchise began in 1871 and that it represented through 1952. Annual membership is $15 and includes a newsletter. Send payment to: Boston Braves Historical Association, P.O. Box 5668, Marlboro, Mass. 01752. For more information, call (508) 485-1423 or visit Boston-braves.com.



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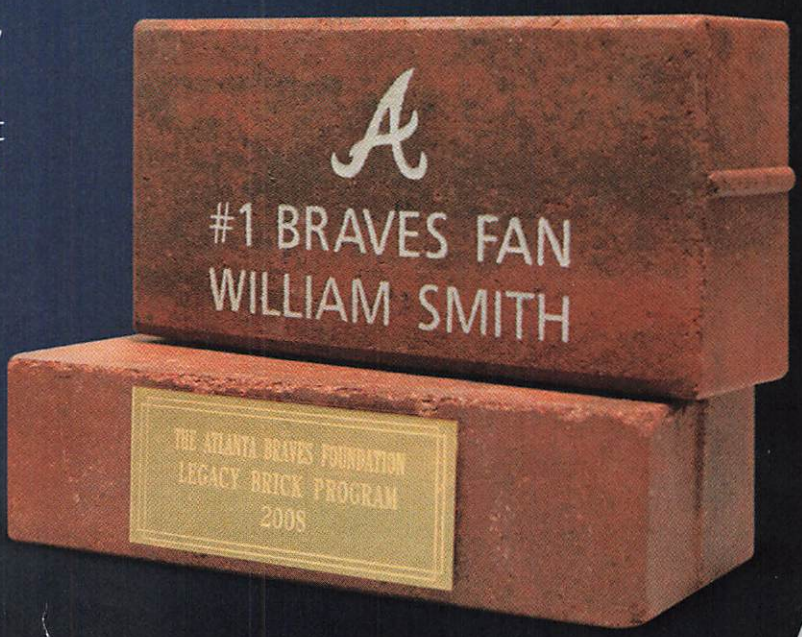

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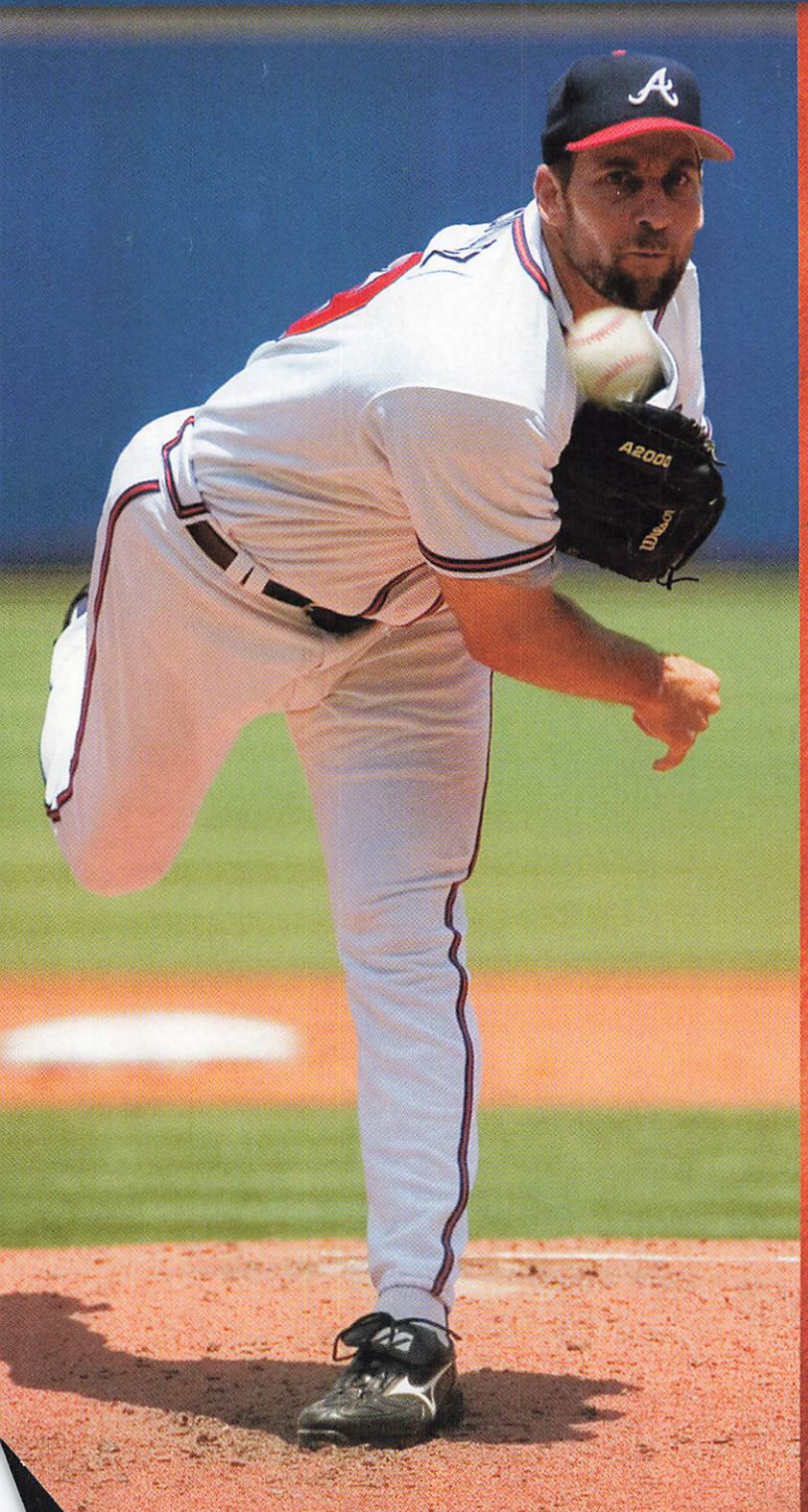

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